LANCER BOOKS 71-309 35¢

THE BOLD STORY OF A MAN CAUGHT BETWEEN TWO STRANGE LOVES!

TOO LATE BLUES

BY STUART JAMES — A BIG NEW PARAMOUNT PICTURE STARRING

BOBBY DARIN & STELLA STEVENS

Produced and Directed by JOHN CASSAVETES

MAN, THIS IS THE LIFE . . .

Ghost and Red, Shelley and Charlie; playing together, digging life—yet, something was missing. Then one day "The Princess" walked into their lives and certainly flipped things . . .

"He entered the apartment and she closed the door. She was leaning back against the door, the blonde hair framing the delicately featured face that was almost too beautiful, the soft-textured skin that was lightly tanned, the long slender neck, the high-collar print blouse that thrust over the high, full breasts and plunged to the narrow waist, the orange slacks that hugged the rounded hips and dropped along the long legs.

'You're even more beautiful in the daylight.'

'Oh, Ghost—' she said.

He caught her as she moved into his arms and held her tightly, breathing into her hair . . ."

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By Stuart James

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CHAPTER ONE

"NO," GHOST said, "it's out of the question."

"But why not?" Charles wailed, scowling. "It don't make sense hanging around this nothing town."

"We're working," Ghost said. He didn't like to keep arguing about this same thing. It annoyed him that Charlie kept bringing it up.

"Working," Charlie said. "You call this working? Yesterday we played an orphanage. Last week we played the Home For The Blind. The week before that—"

"We're blowing together," Ghost said. "That's what's important."

"So we'd still be together," Charlie said. "The difference is we'd be playing for an audience."

"Shelley's got his wife," Ghost said.

"We take her along."

"There's no point in it."

"You kidding? Take a place like Denver. We could get a

date like *that.*" He snapped his fingers. "Omaha, Kansas City, Pittsburgh. We'd be working steady."

"We're not ready," Ghost said.

"You mean you don't wanta go," Charlie said.

"Okay. So I don't wanta go."

"We'll never make it here," Charlie said. "This town is a bad scene for jazz. What's here? The Hague, the Rendezvous down in Balboa. The rest, nothing."

"So Red Norvo's nothing? Tal Farlow's nothing?"

"They found a home," Charlie said. "You know what I mean. This place is a drag, a real nothing town."

"It's a town," Ghost said. "A town's a town. We're doing things. We're blowing together. We swing. We work."

"For charity," Charlie argued. "I wanta blow for an audience. We oughta be gigging around. I tell you, man, we need a spot."

"Later, man, later." Ghost was fighting to control his mounting annoyance. He didn't want to blow off at Charlie. "C'mon," he said, lifting his arm to wave, "there's Red and Shelley."

He dropped down the steps of the transient flea bag to the sidewalk. Red and Shelley angled across Hudson Street. They swung along with the animated gait of youth, both talking, hands moving. Ghost and Charlie waited. Red and Shelley leaped to the curb.

"Hey," Red said.

"Hi," Ghost said.

"What ya say, Charlie, old man?"

"Same old jazz," Charlie said.

"Where's Pete?" Red asked.

"We're gonna meet him at the Greek's," Ghost said.

"Great."

The four started down Hudson Street. Red walked with Ghost. Charlie fell back with Shelley.

It was evening. In the distance was the roar of freeway traffic, the supper-bound Angelenos, the impatient angry sound of the suicide rush for home. It was not too warm. A slight breeze picked at the reed-like palms.

"What you been doing?" Red asked.

"Nothing much. Worked on that new arrangement. Had a few beers with Charlie."

"I had a couple of live ones," Red said. "Real swinging chicks. We were up to their place listening to some new Ormette Coleman. Man, he's way out. The sound he gets from that crazy plastic horn. It's wild."

"Who were the chicks?"

"Just girls, y'know. They hop at that drive-in at Santa Monica and Vine. One's kind of a dog, but the other, the redhead, now she's something. The dog is stacked, I mean really built, but the redhead now, well, I mean she's got it. Everything. And she's hip."

They turned right on Sunset Boulevard. Cars fought for position, rushed four abreast. Buses belched noise and fumes, lumbered in and away from the curb. Knots of people, mostly girls, clustered at the bus stops.

"How'd you do?" Ghost asked.

"Shelley goofed it," Red said. He began to laugh and turned his head to look back at Shelley. "You should have heard this cat." Red chuckled and danced along sideways to face his audience. "There we are in the apartment. We been there maybe two hours listening to records, talking, having a few drinks. I'm sitting on the floor with the redhead and Shelley's on the couch. I'm making my little pitch, y'know, but Shelley is gone. I mean this cat is just listening to the sounds. So this other girl, this Margaret, is getting no action and she's getting teed-off. I mean this kid is all body and she knows what's for. So she's belting the sauce and glaring at Shelley and stalking around in these short shorts. I figure something's gotta give, but old Shelley don't give the broad a tumble."

"I was listening," Shelley said.

"Wait . . . wait . . . let me finish. Shelley's leaning back on the couch, see, so the chick shuffles up and stands looking down at him. She reaches up and unbuttons her blouse. Now get this. This is all she's wearing, and this kid is like built! I mean she's really got it." He gestured, holding both spread hands out from his chest. "Old Shel doesn't even seem to notice. So the chick leans over and plants both hands on the back of the couch. Shelley is still looking straight ahead, but now I can't see him."

"Well, look," Shelley said in defense, "If you were—"

"Wait a minute! Wait a minute!" Red shouted, waving his

hands. He was almost choking with laughter. "Listen! The chick says, 'Well?', and Shelley says . . . oh, jesus . . . he says, 'Honey, you're cross-eyed.' "

Ghost grinned, envisioning the scene. Red stopped and clutched his sides, doubled over. Charlie laughed, breaking his usual taciturn expression, and Shelley grinned sheepishly, pleased with the reception to his wit.

Pedestrians stared at the four and gave them a wide berth. They pranced and chortled, pummeled each other with raucous, uninhibited joy.

"What happened then?" Ghost hooted.

"The broad went ape," Red gasped. "I mean she just flipped! The redhead fell apart and we were rolling on the floor laughing. Old Shel didn't move an inch. I mean this cat was the coolest. Then the chick rushes over to the pile of records and starts throwing them. You never saw such a scene. She's screaming and winging the records around the room."

"She damned near took my head off," Shelley said.

"So we split," Red said. "We double-timed right out of there!"

"Too much!" Ghost shouted. "Oh, too much!"

Still laughing, they shagged across Sunset and walked south on Highland, breaking into a run to beat the light at Santa Monica Boulevard.

The laughter died away gradually, but it left the feeling of high spirits. Ghost felt alive, good. This was his own small planet, his world, population: five. The Ghost Wakefield Quintet. And everything was swinging. Yes! Yes! Yes! The group was good and they would get better. And they had something very few combos had. They swung together off the stand. The Brubeck bunch had it, and the Modern Jazz Quartet, and a few others; but mostly musicians made it together only in music, slipped off into their own alien worlds when they stopped blowing; blending only with grudging recognition of talent. Ghost felt lucky. He knew what could happen when mutual admiration turned to competition. Like Gerry Mulligan's first group. Great, until Mulligan and Baker began to compete. For a time it was like watching two gladiators, and even now you can listen to their records and a great part of the excitement is the feeling that something had to give. And like too many musi-

cians they both went looking for sounds beyond the human experience; went after it with *bennies* and *dexies* and *pot*. It was an old, old story, and Ghost didn't like it.

It wasn't going to happen to the Ghost Wakefield Quintet. They were one big instrument. Together they did what none of them could do alone. He was the leader, the catalyst, but the ideas they expressed, the sounds they made, was a group thing. They made each other alive, and it was just a matter of time before they blew to the top. Marijuana, heroin, all the rest; it offered them nothing. Like Red said: *I don't need no pot, man, I was born high.*

They turned left on Melrose. Now Charlie was telling a story about a girl he had met the week before. Ghost only half-listened. With a musician there is always a chick. Nearly always a kook. Ghost had had his fill of them.

". . . so it's about four a.m.," Charlie was saying. "I'm walking along Romaine Street on my way home and here's this car in the middle of the street and two broads trying to push. They're both wearing tight slacks and they look great. . . ."

Just one time, Ghost thought, I like to hear a musician tell a story that doesn't involve a chick eager to throw herself on her back. That's the way it tumbles, though, in this racket you mostly get the kooks. They start collecting records and work their way up to collecting musicians. Of course, Los Angeles had more than its share of nutty broads. The home town is always too slow for them, too dull, and they pour into L.A. looking for kicks. You could run them through an I.B.M. machine and they'd all come out with the same holes punched in them.

". . . so I'm pushing the car," Charlie was saying. "The one broad is behind the wheel and this beautiful little blonde is helping me push. Finally we get a little downgrade and can get up some speed . . ."

They're not good for the group, Ghost thought, but what can a guy do? He needs a woman. Ghost knew that he was wedded to his piano and the marriage was happy, but even the happiest of couples have to swing together when the shades are drawn. So the bridegroom looks for a mistress, and there they are standing in line. He can take his pick of the same nothing broad.

". . . well," Charlie said, "the car gets started and the girl

driving takes off to run up the battery. I'm standing there in the middle of the street with the blonde. About then I'm wondering if maybe I can't turn this into something, y'know, like maybe I'll get her phone number or make a date . . ."

Ghost knew how the story would end. So did Red and so did Shelley. It was always the same. But they listened hoping for a variation on the theme.

". . . the blonde turns and walks over to me. She walks right into my arms and turns her face up to be kissed. Then she's all over me. I was startled. She didn't look like the type . . ."

That, at least, is a variation. Usually they all look like the type. The story was threatening Ghost's feeling of joyous well-being and it annoyed him. A musician had as much chance of finding a decent female as did a uniformed sailor in Port Said. But there were always the exceptions like Shelley's wife. She was fine and Shelley knew it. But for the musician to try to pick out one woman from the pack was the deadliest game of Russian Roulette.

". . . my head was spinning," Charlie said, "and she says in this husky voice, 'I'm going to take you home with me.' I tell you I never had anything like that happen to me before."

"It ended the same way," Ghost said.

"What? How you mean?"

"You left in the morning."

"Of course."

"And she's just a story. One more tramp."

"Whatta ya expect? She was fantastic, beautiful."

"A fantastic, beautiful tramp," Ghost said, his voice edged with bitterness.

"Man, what's eating you?"

"Nothing," Ghost said. "Just making my point. It ended the same way." Maybe he's right, Ghost thought, maybe it's better that it ends the same way. If you're married to the music, and the transient mistress is a dreary escapade, you're always eager to get back to the arms of the wife. But dammit, there ought to be more.

They passed into a small business section; two small neighborhood bars, a drug store that doubled as a coffee counter, a notions store, a dry cleaner, the usual collection

of street-corner loafers, the gaudily-dressed too-late hustler with the orange hair and too-many-miles tired face perched hopefully on the barstool by the window, a small food market, a beauty shop with Attorney Tax Forms Prepared on the second floor, and Nick's Pool Hall. The main street out of any Nebraska town just two blocks from glamorous Paramount Studios.

The four burst into Nick's, dodged inside the door and fanned out. They pointed their fingers, thumbs up, to imitate pistols. The long rectangular room was nearly empty. Nick was racking balls at one table, Pete was playing rotation at another. The lights hanging from the ceiling caught the reflection of green felt and gave the room a cool glow. There was a cigar stand and cash register to the left of the entrance, cue racks and a fly-specked assortment of girlie posters covered the wall on the right. In the rear, beyond the three billiard tables, were four round, wooden tables for cards, drinking or eating. At the far end was the bat-wing door to a small kitchen; to the right of that a closed door that led to a private back room and the stairway to the upstairs apartment where Nick lived with his three younger sisters.

"Okay, let's get 'em up!" Red shouted.

"This is a raid!"

"Don't nobody move!"

"This is the fuzz! Everybody on the floor!"

Nick leaped with surprise, exploding the racked balls over the table. "Damn!"

Pete swung around. He crouched and raised the cue stick. "You'll never take me alive! Rat-tat-a-tat-tat!"

"Bang-bang!"

"Barbarians!" Nick shouted. He was a small, dark-skinned, bandy-legged man with a thin halo of dark hair circling his large, bald head.

"Cut 'em off at the pass!"

The four leaped into the room, shouting and laughing. They surrounded Pete and hammered on him playfully. Pete covered himself and laughed.

"Where ya been, old Dad?" Red shouted.

"Look at him. Practicing to hustle his old buddies!"

"What's the word, old man?"

"Lunatics!" Nick bellowed. "Bums!"

"Hey, Greek, where's the beer?"

"Where it's always been," Nick growled, trying to mask his delight.

"Hey, getta load of the Greek! a comedian, yet!"

"Funnnnny, man!"

"What's to eat?"

"Nothing's to eat for loafers!"

"Hey, now, how ya *like* that man? Loafers, yet. We give his joint class and he calls us loafers."

"Bums!"

"Let's get 'im!" The four danced forward, circling, making menacing gestures towards Nick; they could not maintain the stern looks for more than a moment, and they all burst into laughter and gave it up.

"How about a game of rotation?" Red said. "C'mon we'll take on the old pool shark."

"Fifty cents a hour!" Nick shouted. "No credit cards!"

"Okay, okay."

"Rack 'em up, old Pete."

"Hey, Nick, howabout a sandwich. Sandwich," Red said. He mimicked Nick's accent. "All sammich."

"Ha! Listen to him. He talks English like man from Mars. Big deal!"

"Lay off, Red!"

"Okay, okay. Howabout the sammich?"

"Hah! smart guy! What kinda sammich?"

"The works," Red said. He was chalking up a cue. "Bologna, ham, sardines . . . you know . . . the whole bit."

"I got no help," Nick said. "You help me, Ghost?"

"Hey, Ghost, help the Greek."

"Whatta ya, outta your head? I'm wearing a suit. Cut the jokes, huh? Just break out the beer."

"C'mon, c'mon, somebody break 'em." Shelley was flexing his cue. "I'm hot tonight."

Nick retired to the kitchen and they concentrated on the game. The room was suddenly quiet. The talk was subdued, broken by the occasional exclamation or wail and the spasmodic click of the balls.

A tableau in the green-glow smoke haze: Pete, crouched over the table, soft paunch spilling over his belt, he sights along the cue stick, squinting his dull blue eyes. He's been

around and back, a horn that walks like a man. The receding hairline, the pallor, the tired face; they say, I been swinging with this gig for a bit and some, yes! I don't want to do nothing, think nothing, just wanta blow, yes! Shelley. Leaning on his cue, nervously rubbing chalk on the leather tip, doing it with a beat, a two-legged metronome. He must have tapped out a beat on his cradle, that one, a guy who even chews with a beat. See now, the balls click . . . click . . . click, click . . . click . . . a beat, and he takes it up, tapping the base of the cue stick on the floor, yes! He is young with old eyes. Twenty-four years. He is wiry, with powerful arms and long, articulate hands. He looks sad, glad, grim, happy—all at once. He is like a large, bared nerve, a pure emotion that hears and thinks in rhythm. Red. Now, then, this is a cat. He is younger than Shelley by a year, just short of six-feet with an open, ready-to-laugh face and a tousled mop of orange hair. When he doesn't have his arms around his bass he is trying to get them around a girl. His interest in life is life. Charlie. He watches the table intently and doesn't speak. He has good looks in a bitter sort of way. Twenty-five, this one, and full of quiet anger. His youth takes over when he romps with the others, but the deep anger always claims him, pulls him back. He always seems to stand slightly apart. He is quiet, but he talks on his horn; a brutal, spewing, angry tenor that screams and wails and grumbles with the blues. This is a bad scene, he says in sight and sound, this life gig is from hunger. And Ghost. Yes, Ghost. John Wakefield. Same age as Charlie, but smaller. What does he want? Even *he* doesn't know. A way out group, that, there around the pool table. Click, yes! Click . . . click, click . . . click!

"I'll bank for the seven."

"Not a chance."

"Watch it."

Thump. Off the side. Thump. Silence. Click! Slow, lazy roll. Into the side pocket.

"Damn."

"Nothing to it."

"A regular shark."

"Let's play a buck a point."

"The man's out of his skull."

"Stand back, now, here goes the eight."

Nick came in from the kitchen and placed the sandwiches on a table. He went to the cooler for the beer.

"Hey, Nick," Red said, "where the girls?"

"Gambling," Nick said. "They got a card game going over at Millie Papdakis's place."

"You oughta keep your sisters off the street," Charlie said.

"I figure it's better than being around bums like you."

"Bums!" Shelley shouted. "How come we're bums?"

"Ignorants," Nick said. "Why don't you go out and work for a living?"

"We work," Ghost said.

"Hah!"

"What do you mean—work?" Ghost said. "You want I should become President of the United States?"

Nick crossed himself. "Heaven help us that should happen," he said.

"Get the Ghost," Shelley said. "Pushing himself."

"We work," Ghost went on, "and we get married and settle down. And so whatta we get? We get kids and we slave for fifty years. We tear our guts out for the stinking paycheck." His voice was bitter and his hands on the cue stick were white. The others listened with surprise at his vehemence. "We knock ourselves out to make some fat bastard fatter. Whatta we get? Just whatta we get? Death, that's what, the slow, worm-eating death! We lose our friendship, we lose our fun, our music, we miss the ship!"

Red reached out and touched his arm. "Easy, man. Take it cool, huh?"

"Man," Shelley said, "you're really bugged."

"Agh."

"It's this lousy town," Charlie said. "It's gets to you."

"You want mustard on these sammiches?"

"Fix them in your own style, Pop," Pete said, changing the mood. "We're a bunch of free thinkers."

What a stupid thing, Ghost thought, jumping on the Greek like that. He sought to appease him. "Hey, Nick," he said, "there's a party on tonight. C'mon along with us."

"I'm going to the movies," Nick said.

"He's quiet and dependable," Pete said.

"Better I should be," Nick answered. "Just a lot of cheap dames and beards at your parties."

"What's wrong with beards? The Old Greeks used to wear beards."

"They were not finger-poppin' daddies." He snapped his fingers and pranced in a mock charade of the five musicians. They broke into laughter.

"Oh, man, Nick, you are too much. I mean, TOO much!"

"Eat this stuff," Nick said. "Even loafers gotta eat."

They left the pool game and sat at the table. They ate and drank the cold beer.

"Who's party?" Charlie asked.

"Baby Jackson," Ghost said.

"Hey, hey, now, that oughta be a swinger."

"Let's hope."

"It'll be a drag," Charlie said.

"Oh, man, listen to him," Pete said.

"The griper."

"Old man gloom."

"This scene is from hunger," Charlie said. "A New York party, now that's something."

Ghost scowled over his beer. He knew that Charlie was working back to his old melody.

"What do we do after this week?" Charlie asked.

Ghost looked up and sighed. Charlie was putting it to him in front of the others, like putting it up for the vote. "Something crazy will turn up," he said. "There's a circus coming into town. Be kind of wild to play for all those lions and tigers. And the cat that runs the whole shebang is an old friend of mind and he—"

"Listen, Ghost," Charlie said, interrupting, "this thing is getting serious. All we get is festivals and these weird benefits. Festivals in Monterey, festivals in Frisco, circuses, playing jazz for deaf mutes, for the blind, for old ladies' homes."

"Yeah," Pete said, frowning, "he's got a point, Ghost. Like tomorrow, we're gonna play in a park. A park for chrissake; a sunshine festival."

"A morning nothing," Charlie said. "When we gonna make it, Ghost, that's what I want to know."

"Never," Ghost said. He was annoyed. Charlie was putting the needle in and he didn't like it. "Not if you're looking for some rainbow and you haven't found it."

"That ain't it, man," Charlie said. "We oughta get a nighttime spot once in awhile." He glanced around at the others

to make his point. "We're swinging together now. Somebody oughta hear us. I say we need a gig somewhere. These daytime things, man, you play for nobody."

"Nobody but people," Ghost said.

"You gotta make it in this world—otherwise you're nothing."

"We're something," Ghost said, the slow anger beginning to creep up his neck.

"I'm happy," Red said. "I don't care where I play, just so long as I play. You happy, Shelley?"

"Happy, man." Shelley was tapping a rhythmn with his beer bottle.

"You happy, Ghost?"

"Happy."

"Yeah. Daytime, nighttime, just so we swing. C'mon, old Charlieo, get happy."

"Man," Pete said, "I'm thirty-seven years old . . . whatever that means. I'm happy."

Ghost felt better. The moment might have developed into something bad, but the group had swung with him. "Charlie Griper," Ghost said, "what's the hour?"

"Seven-thirty," Charlie said.

"We'll blast outta here pretty soon," Ghost said. He felt good, alive. It was like a reprieve. Charlie was wrong. All these weird dates, they were adding up to something. The group was going to find themselves in some way, really swing away from the pack and ride. They were close to it, Ghost knew, and moving around wouldn't help. Charlie was hungry for bread, but he wasn't seeing the big thing. The big thing was that there was something to say, and the group was getting close to saying it; the group was the big voice, the jazz voice that would howl with all the emotion of the soul. And Ghost knew that when the voice spoke, it would give him the word, tell him what it was all about —all this living.

CHAPTER TWO

THE PARTY was swinging when they arrived.

A uniformed doorman gave them the cool once-over, but he opened the door for them. He scowled when Red snapped to attention and saluted. Nuts! he thought, a world full of nuts!

The elevator took them to the sixth floor. They went along the plush carpeted hallway, Shelley already snapping his fingers to the muted sound of a distant combo.

Ghost leaned on the doorbell. The door opened and a tall, swarthy man in a tuxedo admitted them to the foyer.

"Who you?" the big cat said.

"Friends of Baby's," Ghost said.

"Everybody's friends of Baby's. Who you?"

"Sam Spade," Ghost said. "Who you?"

"I'm—hey, whatta ya trying?" The big guy stiffened and was balling his fists.

"Ghost Wakefield," Ghost said quickly.

"I'll see," the big cat said. He left them standing in the foyer. Red was making faces in an ornate mirror. Charlie slouched against the wall, scowling.

"What kinda jazz is this?" Pete asked. "I'm surprised he didn't frisk us."

"Agh, y'know," Ghost said, "a party like this, it gets a lot of crashers."

"Just the same I don't—"

"Ghost! Ghost! Hey, where ya been, man?" Baby Jackson burst into the foyer wearing a keyboard smile. He was a tall, light negro. He grabbed Ghost by the shouders and shook him. "Oh, man, you, how's it? Man, it's good to see you. You never come around! Oh, man, we have got the craziest, mixed-up sexiest party ever! I mean like it's a drag, man, the draggiest!" His voice was high-pitched and frenzied.

"You know the boys," Ghost said.

"Do I know the boys? Man, I been trying to get Charlie away from you for years!"

"Why don't you," Charlie said.

"Oh, now listen to the old Charlie!" Baby swung around and grasped Charlie's shoulder. "Sweetie, you're with a good man. You treat him with respect, hear?" He turned to Red and Shelley. "Hello, Red, how's the chicks?"

"Still laying," Red said.

"Oh, listen to him! Listen to that old red rooster!" Baby was swinging, bouncing, hitting the verbal kick with the frantic need of the man who paid for the party. "Ghost, boy, I dig what you guys are playing. I LOVE what you men do. I mean, I really mean it. Man, if I could just afford it. If I could just cut out and spend some time swinging, I mean just swinging. Well, I mean, well! You take these cats here tonight . . . nothing, man . . . I mean, just a bunch of hangers-on, drifters, leaners, chicks, smilers . . . real nothing . . . just terrible! Hey there, Shelley! What you doing hiding behind your drumsticks? Oh, c'mon, c'mon, enjoy the party. Shelley, man, I hear you tied the knot. Why didn't you invite me to the wedding?"

"It was small," Shelley said.

"Oh, yes," Baby said, still babbling as though something would happen if the talk stopped; chattering to maintain the

frenzy as though afraid that everything would turn into a pumpkin if he turned it off. He pushed the group through the foyer and into the huge, lavish living room. "You boys need drinks! C'mon now, I'll get you something. You gotta turn on with something."

The room was crowded. It was a vast, thickly carpeted rectangle with large windows covering the far end. It was an obstacle course of divans and chairs and low tables. A staircase ran up one wall to a balcony and rooms above. Near the staircase a combo played jazz, but their sound was just an addition to the confused din. It was a mixed group of white and negro, an expensive crowd intermingled with musicians, singers, agents.

Baby caught the arm of a passing waiter. "You got champagne in that bucket?"

"Yes, sir."

"Oh, man, don't be so hostile! Don't just stand there. Give these people a drink. Be sociable. This is an expensive party."

A clutch of guests set up a cry for Jackson, shouting above the confusion. "Baby! Hey, Baby, c'mere!"

"Coming. I'm coming." Jackson turned to Ghost and chortled happily. "Ghost, man, I am loved! You ever see such a party like this? I mean, man, when I was a little boy in Nashville, Tennessee, I couldn't walk on the same side of the street with these people. Man, I tell you if I was down there now, they'd lynch me." He sobered suddenly. "But that's another issue. Have fun, huh?" He shouldered away into the mob.

Yeah, man, Ghost thought, fun, fun. He gazed around the room. The waiter had given him a glass of champagne and he sipped it slowly. His eyes went over the people. You may not know it, Baby, he thought, but if you wasn't Baby Jackson they'd probably lynch you here. He saw a few familiar faces, nobody he wanted to see, the usual nothing, the glittering mass of Hollywood nothing. He turned back to his friends and lifted his glass. "Here's how," he said. They drank. Ghost waved his arm, taking in the crowded room. "It's amazing," he said. "I don't miss this at all. Charlie?"

"Yeah, Ghost?"

"You miss it?"

"It's the top, man. And I've always wanted to be the top. Two years ago I was playing in bands, big bands. Featured. Now we play charities. Sure I miss it. I'm no freak."

"How much you think a party like this costs?" Red asked.

There was no answer and Pete said, "Who cares? It's costing me nothing, so I'm gonna enjoy it."

They moved into the mass. Ghost kept to the fringe of the crowd. The jumbled assault of talk grated on him. This was not his scene. Parties. Why parties? A mass of people gathered together to drink and talk. A drag. He had a feeling of detachment for the people and he watched them perform. The women were dressed to show as much breast as the law allowed. The world on the make. Man, a guy's got to get bombed to enjoy this. There were some parties he liked. The small party of friends. There you could swing together. You were there because you liked the people and wanted to be with them. This kind of scene, now, this was awful. What do they want, this mob? What are they looking for? Oh, man, get off it! Don't worry it!

Ghost shouldered through the crowd until he could see the piano. He lifted his drink, then stopped. His hand came down and he stared.

The girl was wearing a skin-tight white dress with most of her back exposed. She was in the shadows near the piano and abstract shafts of light crossed her. Ghost had not seen her face, but he knew that she was beautiful. He moved closer. He recognized Benny Flowers, the artist's agent. Benny was at her side, holding her arm, talking to her. The piano man fingered some chords and listened to what someone was saying into his ear. A crowd leaned on the perimeter of the piano.

Ghost moved closer. The girl had hit him. Something, what, he didn't know, something had happened the moment he saw her. He was interested.

"You gotta relax, honey," Benny was saying. "Now just take it easy, Jess, don't be nervous."

Ghost saw her face. He was right. Beautiful. Her hair was a soft, blonde color; her mouth, nose, everything was right for her, but it was the eyes that got him. There was a wish-I-was-somewhere-else look in them, a kind of despairing sadness.

"Honey," the piano man said. He snapped his fingers at the girl. "Honey . . . now listen."

The tenor man said, "You know what she's nervous about? She thinks we're something."

"Don't think we're something, honey," the trumpet man said to her. "You sing out. Everybody's got to start somewhere."

"My sister had the same problem," the tenor man said. "She got her start in a store-front church. She had a voice that could crack a glass. When they wanted her to cut a record she just froze. Couldn't sing a note."

"C'mon, honey, give it a try."

"Just sing out, now. Take it easy."

"All right," the girl said, "let's try it."

"That's a girl," the piano man said. "I'll play—you listen." He began to play *How High The Moon*, vamping the melody, improvising, working over and around the melody, running away with some peculiar licks, returning.

The girl leaned forward, listening intently. She clutched her hands together. Ghost watched her closely. His eyes dropped to her hands. Nervous. Scared kid. She was something to look at. He saw the Benny Flowers touch in the dress. Benny knew how to package his merchandise. The dress contained, rather than covered, the full breasts, showed the deep valley of cleavage. It clung to her like a second skin and there was no girdle to distort the unbroken line that flared from waist to hips. She had it, the works.

"I don't know the lyrics of that," she said.

"Improvise, sweetie," the tenor man said.

"Listen to the man, now," Benny Flowers said, "Improvise it."

"I'll take it first," the tenor man said. He lifted his horn. He came in from outside and worked down to the melody, then he was gone. The drums and bass picked it up and held a steady beat for him, the piano backing it up with an anchor of chords. He went out, ending on a discordant wail, and took the horn from his lips to sing, "And I don't know the lyrics, either."

The group had a beat going and the piano man turned back to the girl. "Hey, now, wait a minute. Listen to this. Miss Polanski . . . Miss Polanski . . . listen to this. I'm going to play something simple."

The tenor man said, "You know, my sister—"

"Shaddup," the piano man said. "Honey, listen to this. I'm going to play something very simple. You repeat what I play . . . musically . . . with your voice. Hey, now, hold it, you guys, just hold it a minute." The rythm ceased. "Now get this." He played three notes. The girl answered vocally. "That's fine. Now try this." He played six notes and the girl answered him. "Great! You see, I'm a jazz man. I don't know anything about singing." He played the simple notes again and she answered him; he began to build and she followed, her voice a deep-throated instrument answering his call. The drummer began to fill and the bass picked it up. The girl had her head thrown back, her eyes closed, the notes pouring out clear and full.

Ghost watched her, enchanted by what he was hearing. He was oblivious to the mob noise.

"Ghost, man, why no hello?"

Turning, Ghost faced Benny Flowers. "I didn't see you man."

Benny nodded toward the girl. "What do you think?"

"Beautiful."

"She needs a little experience, but she has a chance."

"I think she's ready. She's got the magic."

"I'm not talking about her looks, now."

The girl had taken off. She was leading the piano. She went into a vocal ride, a long, sustained throaty journey. The piano followed, the man grinning as she reached, the sweat running on his face. "Go, go, go!" Hands were clapping, feet stomping. The rest of the room was suddenly listening. "Go, girl, yes, yes, go!" She hit her peak, but the piano man went on, bursting into a series of runs that no voice could possibly answer. The girl stopped singing, an expression of panic and confusion crossing her face.

"I—I can't—"

"Of course you can't! Nobody could answer that! That's why I'm the greatest piano player. But, sweetie, you're next!"

The girl smiled with pleasure. The musicians congratulated her. The room picked up its own cacaphony and the combo swung into *It's Only A Paper Moon*. The girl left the piano. She moved over to Benny and Ghost.

"How did I do?" she asked Benny.

Benny smiled sweetly. "You didn't sweetheart," he said.

The smile left the girl's face and she swallowed hard. "But, Benny, I—"

"It's not enough to look pretty," Benny said, shaking his head. "You got to have enthusiasm. When someone asks you to sing, you gotta do it right away. If they ask you to improvise, you gotta improvise. And you can't be nervous. I mean, you looked like Amateur Night in Dixie up there."

"But I didn't know the number, Benny."

"I'm not talking about the number," Benny said, the soft voice cutting like a diamond bit. "I'm talking about you need more experience, honey. You looked beautiful. You have talent. But what you need is experience. I can't put you to work yet."

Ghost listened, not liking the way Benny was beating her down. "I think you were great," he said.

Benny bridled for an instant, but he managed to maintain the smile. He turned to Ghost. "Oh, Jess, I want you to meet—"

The girl was holding her breath, fighting to keep back the tears. She turned suddenly and ran up the stairs to the lounge. Benny smiled and shrugged.

"That girl is good, Benny," Ghost said. "Why were you so tough on her?"

Benny pulled a cigar from his pocket and unwrapped it. He winked at Ghost. "That's why I'm a great agent," he said. "I never let a client off the hook." He lit the cigar and added its blue smoke to the cloud circling the room. "Expect the best—and you get the best." He puffed, letting the words hang, as though they belonged in Bartlett's. "So," he said, changing the mood, "how are you, you old son-of-a-gun?"

"Good," Ghost said, his eyes straying to the closed door of the lounge. "Real fine."

"Are you still playing in the parks and old ladies' homes? Why don't you come back and get a little night club pallor?"

"We're happy where we are," Ghost said.

"It's a waste," Benny said, sadly, rolling his head on his short, fat neck. "A great waste of talent. What's wrong with a record or two? Come on, you rat, I love you. Tell me, what's wrong with cutting a couple of sides? Let me set it up. Let one old friend help another old friend."

"We don't need it."

"You guys stopped eating? You found a secret, some kind of new pill?"

"It's not that," Ghost said, wishing the conversation would end. "Look, Benny, you got what you want. Good. We'll play what we want. Okay? We're blowing good, it's relaxing, we like it."

"Okay, so you don't like night clubs."

"It's the finks in them we don't like."

"Okay, okay already. So you cut a good record and make a little money. What's wrong with that?"

"We'd have to play crap."

"Says who? Since when? Who said anything about that? Ghost, baby, this is Benny Flowers. You play what you want. Leave it to old Benny. I'll work on a deal tomorrow."

Ghost stared at the little man for a long moment, then he smiled and shook his head. "You're a funny guy, Benny."

"I'm not funny. I'm a good agent. I traded in my soul for a Cadillac, and got some change. I'm a good agent."

Ghost's gaze had been straying over the crowd. He saw Shelley moving towards him, his arm around a beautiful brunette. He frowned. "Hey, Shelley," he called.

Shelley's arm dropped away from the girl when he saw Ghost. He said something to her, shrugged, and turned away. He pushed through the crush of people to Ghost's side. "Hi, Ghost," he said, grinning sheepishly. "We went to school together."

"Some school," Ghost said.

"Yeah." Shelley laughed. "Say, I'm gonna split out of here. My wife's waiting for me. Whatta ya say, ready to go?"

"Don't I get no Hello?" Benny wailed. "I got leprosy or something?"

"I don't make it a habit to talk to agents," Shelley said. "You ready to go, Ghost?"

"You go ahead," Ghost said. "You don't need me to say Hello to your wife."

"Look, Ghost, that girl . . . I mean, I just met her . . . y'know, I mean I just said Hello . . ."

"Get lost, will you?"

Shelley grinned and hunched his shoulders. "Okay, I'll see ya, huh?" He turned and pushed into the crowd.

"So long," Benny said, "you rising young failure."

Ghost watched the tall brunette step into Shelley's path, and heard Shelley say, "Look, I'll see ya, huh? I gotta split."

"But, honey, we were gonna . . ."

"Yeah. Some other time, huh? I'll give you a ring." Shelley pushed past her and headed for the door.

Ghost grimaced. The headhunters were always out in force. Beautiful broads looking for new trophies. He turned back to Benny, but the agent was gazing over the crowd. He looked up the stairs, but the lounge door was still closed. He rummaged for a cigarette and lit it. He heard a familiar voice and turned. Charlie was at the foot of the stairs talking to two men.

"I mean, fine, if you're on top," Charlie was saying, "and you can stay on top. But otherwise, why fight the club circuit? People don't come to listen—they come to drink."

"Still," one of the men said, "a musician needs a showcase, Charlie. My whole point is, a guy with your talent shouldn't waste it playing for nobodies. If Wakefield wants to be a missionary, okay, let him. But a guy like you, Charlie. I mean, well, you know. . ."

"Yeah, I know," Charlie said. "I know. I sleep nights—I know I'm playing better jazz than I ever played in my life." His voice rang with the sharp edge of anger. "Where do you get off knocking our group?"

"Nobody's knocking your group. It's just that you're a great horn, Charlie. I hate to see you getting nowhere."

"When was the last time you heard our group?"

"Man, I never heard your group. I just heard where you been playing . . ."

"Well, look, you don't have to get—"

"Agh!" Charlie whirled away. He pushed through the crowd and Ghost followed him with his eyes, a feeling of pleasure running through him. The family might fight, but don't let any outsiders try to get into it. Charlie stopped where Pete was standing with a group. Pete had his hands to his mouth and was imitating the sound of a horn. He lowered his hands. Ghost strained to hear.

"See what I mean," Pete said. "It's still got the melody, but it's not right on the head."

"But that's so un-cool," a girl said. "The melody, I mean, well, you know?"

"I'd use a mute," a man said, "if it was me, which it isn't. But I might—someday. I'd stick right to the melody, only away from it so you didn't know it and then improvise the awayness."

"That's a good point, Pete," Charlie said. "I always did think you had too much hereness and not enough awayness."

"That could be your problem," the girl said. "I mean, we've all got them, you know."

"Yeah," Charlie said, glaring at the girl, "I'll bet you do."

"What?"

"C'mon, Pete, let's try some awayness." He pulled Pete away and they moved closer to Ghost.

"Ugly chick," Pete said.

"She's got problems," Charlie said. They both laughed. "I could fix her problem," Charlie said.

"You got no taste," Pete said. "Man, this party's a twenty-four carat drag."

"A bunch of freaks."

"Let's blast outta here. Where's Ghost?"

"Here, man," Ghost said.

They both looked up. "Ghost," Pete said, "We're gonna shove. Where's Shelley?"

"Went home to his wife," Ghost said.

"Where's Red?"

Ghost pointed to the piano where Red was in earnest conversation with a stout, middle-aged man and a woman who was obviously his wife. The man had a loud voice.

"That's a good thing you boys do," he said. "My wife gave me four kids. One of them was deaf."

"Gee," Red said, "that's too bad."

"Oh, he's okay now. We got an operation. But that's a very good thing you say you do. Right, Martha?"

The woman next to him beamed. "I think it's very sweet," she said.

"Well, we get paid," Red said. "Only scale, but we get paid."

"It's still very good. What kind of group is it, modern?"

"Yeah."

"Well, say, here's my card. I'm with Blue Star Records." He chortled. "You might say I *am* Blue Star Records. You know Blue Star."

"Of course," Red said.

"You give me a call some time. Maybe I can set up an audition for you boys. I like the way you talk."

"Hey, Red," Pete called.

Red turned. He glanced down at the card, then up at the man. "Well, thanks a lot, Mr. Frielobe. I'll give you a call. Nice meeting you, M'am." He turned and pushed through the crowd to the stairs. "What's up?"

"We're cutting out. C'mon."

"Okay. Where to?"

"Nick's. We'll play some cards."

"You coming, Ghost?"

"I think I'll stick it for a bit," Ghost said.

The three stared at him a moment, then shrugged in unison and turned to battle their way to the door. Ghost watched them go, then he caught a motion from above. His head swiveled. The girl was coming down the stairs. Benny had also turned, and Ghost was doing some fast calculation. The girl was no doubt the latest on Benny's string. He was thinking of just how he was going to sever that string.

"You look beautiful," Benny said, "Just beautiful."

"Thank you, Benny," the girl said.

"Jess," Benny said, "I want you to meet an old and dear friend of mine. John "Ghost" Wakefield."

She held out her hand and Ghost took it. "I think you're just a great singer," Ghost said.

"Let's not talk about it, if you don't mind." She did not smile. She removed her hand.

"Let's go down and have a drink," Benny said. "I'm dry."

They moved down the stairs. Benny took the lead. Ghost let Jess move past him. For an instant their eyes met, and Ghost saw the sadness there, the deep disenchantment. Then she was past him and he followed. Benny talked his way to the bar at the far end of the room. The girl waited while Benny greeted the sea of faces, and Ghost waited behind her. The party annoyed Ghost, and he would rather have been almost anywhere else, but the girl had done something to him; he had no idea just what, but something. He was going to sweat it out. They reached the bar. They waited until three stools were vacated and sat down.

"Bartender," Benny shouted, "give us three glasses of champagne. Make sure they're cold, huh?" He turned to

Jess. "You know how long it's been since I seen this bum? How long has it been, Ghost?"

"Long time," Ghost said.

"Couple of years," Benny said. "I was a musician then. Those days are gone. Gone, gone, went! No more Tia Juanas, no more Philadelphias or Cincinattis or one-night hassles with the drunks in third rate joints. I woke up one night with a hangover. I'd hit some guy in a fight. Broke my hand. He broke my lip. And since then I haven't touched that damned trumpet. Amen! Sometimes I wake up at night and thank that man who busted me in the mouth."

"I didn't know you were a musician, Benny," Jess said.

"Artist, honey, an artist. I drew the line at Jewish Weddings, dances, mountain resorts and playing effect music for comics. And I always made a good living. But, believe me, I thank that man, I thank him with all my heart!" He turned his attention to Ghost. "I'm surprised to find you here, Ghost. You don't make the party scene often."

"Oh," Ghost said, "I bumped into Baby the other day. He's an old friend, too."

"He's the greatest," Benny said. "I handle him now. Got him booked solid. Right on top."

"Good for you," Ghost said, bored with the conversation, bored with the party, bored with everything but the girl beside him. "Is that where you want to be," he asked her, "on top?"

"Hah!" Benny said, interrupting. "This girl is worse than you, Ghost. You heard her sing. She has some talent. But she has no ambition, none at all. I had to twist her arm to get her up here tonight."

"I'm an amateur," Jess said. "I don't try to fool myself or anybody else."

"I can see that," Ghost said. "I mean about playing it straight. I'll tell you one thing, though. Benny's right when he says you're talented. And I'm not putting you on."

"But she needs ambition, Ghost. You can't get along in this world unless you—"

"Benny! Man, where you been? I been looking all over for you." Baby Jackson bulled his way to the bar. "Benny, man, you gotta talk to this cat over here. Hi, Ghost. Hi, there, honey, you were great. Benny, come on, this cat is turning me on something terrible."

"Not now, Baby," Benny said.

Baby stiffened. "What you mean, not now? Look, man, you my agent, and this cat says he got a contract with me for next summer. Now I never signed no contract with him, and that's what I told him."

"Don't worry about it. I know what he means. It's in the talk stage."

"Well, then, you come and talk, man. That's what I give you ten per cent for. You don't mind, do you, sweetie? C'mon, Benny. Ghost, you tell this little lady a story. He's got wonderful stories, honey. Tell her about Mother Goose. C'mon, Benny."

Benny shrugged and slid off the stool. He followed Baby into the morass of people.

Now that he was alone with her, Ghost was at a loss for words. "Would you like another drink?"

"You know what I'd really like?"

"What's that?"

"I'd like you to take me out of this zoo."

Ghost grinned. "A pleasure. Where do you want to go?"

"Just away from here."

"Won't Benny be sore?"

"I'm a big girl. I leave with whom I choose, and I choose you."

"Let's go."

CHAPTER THREE

IT WAS warm. They stood for a moment at the entrance to the apartment house.

"I'll get a cab," Ghost said.

"Let's walk awhile," Jess said. "I'd like to get all that babble out of my head."

"Suits me."

They followed the curving driveway to the street and walked to the right. They walked easily, silently. Jess pulled her stole tight about her shoulders and breathed deeply, tilting her head back to look at the star-pocked sky. "Nice," she said.

"Yeah."

Los Angeles at night can sometimes be the best of places. If you're downtown it is just another crowded city with too much noise and too much neon and just too much. But you can cruise Hollywood Boulevard and you've got "main street" glamour, a palm-lined boardwalk; and there's Santa

Monica that is usually pretty quiet at night; and off either of these main drags you go down streets that are lined with squares of lawn and small houses and muffled voices on porches and the small-town creak of rockers and the porch swing. You can come off a busy boulevard and walk through the Wilshire District and it's like White Plains, New York; big houses and manicured lawns; or you can walk just two blocks north of Hollywood Boulevard and you're in hills with streets that wind and twist through an architectural nightmare, or you can drive through Beverly Hills and see nothing but high hedge and wall. All the same city. And good for walking. A sprawling park.

"What do you play?" Jess asked. Her voice was a husky whisper.

"Piano," Ghost said.

"Why do you play jazz?"

"Why?"

"Yes, why? You must have started with the scale, like anybody else."

"That scale," Ghost said, laughing suddenly. "I played it with ten thumbs."

"So, why jazz?"

"I don't know." Ghost shrugged. "Just happened that way. I liked jazz, I guess. I really don't know."

"Did you start with the classics?"

"Oh, sure. Started when I was twelve. It was my Mother's idea. I never thought much about playing, but she started me on lessons. I didn't do too much with it until I started on Bach. Then I got hung up. And I guess that's how I got interested in jazz. Everything was bop, then, but it developed into progressive. Old Bach was a swinger, you know. He was using chord progressions that are way out even today. And then I heard Gillespie and Charlie Mingus and Charlie Parker and Lester Young, and I just couldn't listen enough. I once heard Billie Holliday sing and I cried." Ghost was conscious of a rapt listener, and he spoke softly, remembering and putting it into words, walking slowly in the soft night, hands jammed in pockets, shoulders slightly hunched. "I knew that I wanted my own voice to be heard. A concert pianist plays what somebody else has written. The jazzmen were talking for themselves. Even if they didn't have much to say, it was still their own. It's sort of like you

hear a guy read a speech, and he might be good, but if you sit down with a guy and he talks, and he's giving it to you real straight and you know he's talking right out of his guts, you have to listen, and even if you don't agree with him, you have to feel with him. I felt with the jazzmen. I can listen to a Beethoven concerto, and I don't care who's playing, the guy I'm really digging is Beethoven. I didn't want that. I wanted to say something. I didn't know what. I'm still not sure, but it's gonna be me."

"Thought you didn't know," Jess said.

"I never tried to put it into words before," Ghost said. "That's the way with jazz. It has nothing to do with words. It's feeling and sound. When you're swinging you know it, but you never know why."

They were quiet then, walking side-by-side, and in both minds separately together ran the same phrase—is this the person I seek—over and over with the monotony of a metronome. Is this him? Is this her? He? She? The Man? The Woman?

Ghost studied her face, the perfect features softened by the night cloak. She seemed to be far away. Her eyes reflected the street lamps. Her lips were slightly parted, a sensuous mouth that offered much. And she had already memorized his face; the black hair parted, the straight nose and belligerent jaw. She thought about the brooding in the eyes, the hunger that she knew was there.

"What about you," Ghost said, "when did you start singing?"

"I never started," she said. "I fool around. I always have. Benny heard me sing in a bar and thought I might be able to work at it. I really don't care."

"What do you want to do?"

"Me? I don't know. Breathe. Live. That's all. I'd sing, I guess, if it paid. We all need money and it's better than hustling drinks. That's all. The life story of Jess Polanski—nothing."

"You sound bitter."

"Yeah."

They were silent again for a long moment, then Ghost said, "Say, I know a place you might like. It's just a place, y'know, but the guy that owns it is nice."

"I'm with you."

They had reached an intersection and Ghost hailed a passing cab. They settled in the back seat and Ghost gave the address. He sat away from her, slightly turned, and watched her. The sadness was back in her eyes. He wanted to reach out and touch her, but did not want to break the silent mood that somehow held them together. The car bucked the city traffic, droned through the channels of neon that is America everywhere and anywhere, charged the traffic light intersections, swerved and turned in the man-made madness of flight from nowhere to nowhere, the driver cursing and muttering. They wheeled to the curb and stopped. Ghost paid the driver, got out and held the door for Jess. The cab pulled away.

"This is Reno's," Ghost said.

They entered, and like he had said, it was just a place. A roofed rectangle that housed a bar, tables and juke box, and the strong smells of pizza and long-ago-people and beer. A man and woman sat at the bar drinking champagne, the obvious two-some: he paying the price to use the overblown body beneath the too-tight dress, she salving her ego with the wine when she really preferred beer. The bartender stood alone polishing a glass—the timeless occupation of boredom. Ghost led Jess to the bar and the bartender smiled warmly.

"Hi, Reno," Ghost said. "Jess, this is Reno. Reno, the Princess."

"What ja say?" Reno said. "Pleased to meet you, Princess."

Ghost glanced at the couple. "Busy tonight, eh?"

"Same old story," Reno said. "I oughta retire."

"We're gonna sit at a table," Ghost said.

"Enjoy yourselves, kids," Reno said.

Ghost took Jess by the elbow and steered her to one of the empty tables. He pulled out her chair and she sat down.

"What kind of a place is this?" Jess asked.

"Pizza, beer, a neighborhood bar where regular people come after work and pass the hours. Lotta lonely people in the world, you know."

"I know," Jess said, and her eyes met his and they held for a moment in understanding.

"Want something to eat?" Ghost asked.

"No, thanks. I'm not very hungry."

Ghost was silent, then, gazing at her. She opened her purse and took out a cigarette. He leaned across and lit it for her. She inhaled deeply, her breasts rising, then she tilted her head and let the smoke curl from her mouth.

"I like that dress," Ghost said.

"It's just cheap."

"I thought Benny picked it."

She looked at him thoughtfully, then took a deep breath. "I wondered when you'd start putting me down."

"I'm not."

"Well, that crack about—"

"It was no crack. I just figured Benny took you to the party to be seen by the right people."

"So?"

"So, he'd make sure you wore something that looked damn good on you, and that dress does. I'm sorry."

She looked skeptical, then smiled. "I'm the one that's sorry. Guess I'm touchy."

"You really are a princess," Ghost said. "You look like one and you sing like one."

"The name's Polanski," she said. "Jess Polanski. And don't bother to tell me how much you can do for my career, and how I ought to be wearing silk, and how nice it is in Acapulco. There isn't any career, and you can't do a thing for me. Understand?"

"You're still sore about what I said."

"I'm not. I just want things straight."

"You figure I'm on the make?"

"Isn't everybody?"

He grinned. "I guess so."

"Then let's lay off the princess jazz, huh?"

"Okay, Princess." He grinned. "Sorry. You want to dance?"

"Okay."

Ghost pushed back from the table and stood. He walked to the juke box. He inserted a quarter, consulted the listings and punched three selections. Jess came and stood at his side.

"I like that," she said.

"It's slow."

"Fine."

He took her in his arms, holding her lightly, and they

began to move in time to the slow fox trot, dancing in the space before the machine.

"You like to dance?" Jess asked.

"Does any man?"

"A lot of them."

"Really? I thought most guys didn't."

"You want to sit down?"

"No."

"You dance very well."

"You're the good one," Ghost said. "I can't dance two steps with most girls. They all try to lead you."

"And you wouldn't want to be led by anybody."

Ghost looked at her quickly, then smiled. "We were talking about dancing."

"And you don't like the way women dance."

"Well, either they lead, or they bounce, or stick their tails out, or something. Anyway, usually I can't make it at all."

"I'll try to keep my tail in," Jess said, laughing lightly.

"Well, you know what I mean."

They moved slowly, shuffling, their bodies touching. Ghost was sharply aware of her. She was just slightly shorter than he and her forehead touched his cheek. He savored the scent of her hair. The touch of her was electric, and he was conscious of the occasional touch of her thigh, the soft give of her breast. Her eyes were closed and she seemed to enjoy moving in his embrace.

Reno was leaning on the bar, stroking his mustache, watching them. A grin creased his swarthy face. "I bet that's the first exercise you've had in a couple of years, Ghost," he said.

Ghost raised his head. "What are you, a trouble-maker? I'm having enough trouble keeping time with the music."

"You kids look good. Real good."

"Reno used to teach at Fred Astaire's," Ghost said.

"Ha!" Reno chortled. "Funny man. I ain't danced since they did the Black Bottom."

"What's that?" Jess asked.

"A Civil War dance," Ghost said. "Reno don't show his age."

"Says you I don't," Reno said. "When I was your age we had some real dances. Hey, you two want a drink?"

"Jess?"

"All right."

They stopped dancing and moved to the bar. Jess sat on a stool and Ghost stood next to her.

"How are the boys?" Reno asked.

"Pretty good," Ghost said.

"You working?"

"We're gonna have a swinging day in the park tomorrow playing for a lot of trees."

"What a life!" Reno said, shaking his head. He turned to Jess. "You ever hear him play?" Jess shook her head and Reno said, "Damndest lot of noise I ever heard."

Jess laughed and Ghost said, "Maybe we came to the wrong place."

"You know what I like?" Reno said. "You know the stuff Guy Lombardo plays? That's music."

Ghost held his head in both hands and moaned. "You see the kind of friends I got? All their taste in their mouth."

"Whatta ya talking? That's music. You might be good, but it ain't music, that's all."

"Thanks, thanks a lot. How about that drink?"

"He's touchy," Reno said to Jess. "A nice guy, but awful touchy. Whatta you want to drink, Princess?"

"I'll mix something up," Ghost said. He swung to the end of the bar and went behind to stand next to Reno. "I'll whip up something to make the hair curl."

"Look at him taking over," Reno said, winking at Jess. "You better watch this guy."

"I'm watching," Jess said.

"I'll need cognac, vodka, vermouth, creme de menthe and Irish."

"He's always got some crazy drink," Reno said. He turned and reached for the bottles, placing them on the bar. Ghost reached under the bar and brought out a large mixing glass, and began to pour.

He felt elated. He could sense that Jess was enjoying his performance. She had lost much of the sadness, the hollow look that seemed to haunt her, and she had also lost much of the defensive attitude that she carried like a club. He wanted to please her, and knew that he was succeeding and the elation filled his chest and pressed tightly against his lungs. It was a new feeling for him, this wanting to please a woman, and he felt like shouting. He recalled something he

had read somewhere. *If you can sing, sing for her; if you can dance, dance for her; if you can jump high, jump high for her; until she doth clap her hands with glee and cry: sing and dance for me my high-jumping lover!* That was the way he felt, and he was ready to stand on his head if it would please her. "Drinking is a luxury," he said. "You can waste it on something ordinary, or you can dream a little."

"It looks like rocket fuel," Jess said. "I'll have something simple."

"Now, I don't understand this," Ghost said, feigning indignation. "I've been nothing but nice to you, nothing but nice. Reno, a cherry. Yeah, now, there you are, that's what makes it look pretty. Now you stir easy for a minute."

"You want my job?" Reno asked.

"Now we mix," Ghost said.

"What a kook, huh, Princess?"

Ghost added cracked ice to the mixture and put it on the machine. He threw the switch. It whirred and clanked.

"If you blow the joint up, you pay!"

"Stand back!" Ghost stopped the machine. "Three chilled glasses, Reno."

Reno went to the freezer for the glasses and put them on the bar.

"Why only two glasses?"

"Thanks, but no thanks. I got a wife and three kids, and I like my stomach."

"You're a complete coward. Here we go, Jess." He began to pour.

"I'm a coward, too," Jess said.

"It's great. It really is. You'll see." He lifted his glass and sipped. He smacked his lips. "Great! Just great!" He held the glass out to Jess. "C'mon, try it. Just a sip."

"Well—oh, all right." She took a small sip, then smiled. "It's very good."

"You kidding?" Reno said, narrowing his eyes. "It looks like embalming fluid."

"It tastes just like creme de menthe," Jess said.

"Lemme try it," Reno said, his curiosity whetted. He took the glass and sipped. He made a face. "Whatta ya know," he said. "That's not bad."

"What did I tell you? If you'd only believe the old Ghost."

"We believe," Reno and Jess said together, then laughed. Ghost filled the two glasses and Reno brought up a third. He filled Reno's glass.

"A toast," Ghost said, raising his glass. "To all the cowards in this world who never mix their drinks. May they one day wake up to this crazy mixed-up world."

They clinked their glasses and drank. They smiled at each other, and Jess said, "It's really good."

"Hey," Reno said, "I've got one. A toast. Here's to the girl who—" He paused and smirked. "Oh, I forgot. It's not for ladies."

"We'll drink anyway," Ghost said. "Here's to a man with a sense of propriety."

"Hey, now that's a good word!" Reno exclaimed.

They drank and Ghost refilled the glasses. "Here we are," he said, "more nectar of the Gods. C'mon, Jess, it's your turn for a toast."

"All right," Jess said. She lifted her glass and furrowed her brow in thought. "Here's to a man I know who plays music in the city parks."

They laughed and drank. The toasts went around again. The glasses emptied and were refilled. They were laughing and drinking.

"Here's to people and drinking," Reno said, "and wives who keep their husbands off the street."

"Here's to a girl," Ghost said, "with a voice like an angel, and a face and a heart and a soul to match."

"Here's to this drink, whatever it is," Jess said, "and to men who say pretty words."

"Here's to me," Reno said.

The couple at the end of the bar were tapping for attention. Reno turned and stared at them with indignation.

"Hey, Reno," the girl said, "the man wants to pay his bill."

"Well, whatta ya know," Reno said. "I work here." He giggled. "I nearly forgot. Now, just hold the toasts a minute while I do my duty to almighty dollar. I'll be right back." He straightened, aimed himself and moved along behind the bar. He stopped before the couple.

"How much?" the man asked. He held his wallet in his hand and the girl was staring at it, making a mental calculation.

"Champagne will cost you three bucks a split," Reno said.

The man put a ten on the bar and said, "Keep it."

"My pleasure," Reno said. "Goodnight."

Reno stared after them a minute, then turned and rang up the sale. He came back to Ghost and Jess.

"Here's to dames," Reno said. "May they just wise up—that money ain't everything."

"Here's to laughs," Jess said. "And come on, fellas, let's have some."

"I got no more drink," Reno said.

"I'll mix up another batch."

"I'll do it," Reno said. "I got the formula, now. You kids go take a turn around with that South American stuff. I gotta cool off, anyway."

"You sure you can mix it?"

"Of course."

Ghost took Jess' hand and walked her to the juke box. The place was silent except for the clink of glass against glass, and the muttering of Reno. Ghost deposited a coin and Jess studied the selector.

"What do you like?"

"Reno wants South American."

"Here's something. You Mambo?"

"I can try."

She pushed the buttons. Ghost was not looking at the machine. His eyes were on the girl and he felt the stirrings within him, feelings he had not felt for a long time. Her beauty made his insides knot. He lifted his hand and placed it on her forearm. She turned her head and gazed at him. Her eyes blinked. She was about to say something, and the expression in her eyes softened. It was as though she were about to reach out and cling to him, then suddenly the eyes were glazed and the muscles of her face stiffened. She turned back to the machine, and when she spoke her voice was edged with bitterness. "Let's keep it cool," she said. Ghost removed his hand. There had been that moment. She had opened up and all that he could possibly have thought about her was on the surface, the naked trust, then she had withdrawn; but it was all there beneath the human hard crust.

The silence was shattered by the wild rattle of a marimba. Jess turned from the machine with her smile on.

She shook her shoulders and turned, tried several steps in time to the beat, then held out her arms. Reno hooted in the background and rattled the ice in the mixer. Ghost joined the dance. He tried to watch her feet. Impossible. He dug the beat and just went with it. Jess had her head thrown back, her eyes closed. Her hips rolled, and her feet raced with the jerky rhythm.

"Ole!" Reno shouted.

Ghost stopped. He stepped back. "Man, I can't make this scene!"

"Sure you can," Jess said, still dancing. "Here, you do this." She demonstrated. "Then one . . . and two . . . three, four, you see?"

"I see, but I can't do."

She giggled and continued to dance alone. Ghost watched her and clapped his hands. The beautiful body moved with the grace of a willow in the wind.

"God, you move beautifully," Ghost said.

"Come on!" She reached and grasped his hands, pulling him to her. "It's easy." She did the steps slowly and he followed. Then gradually he began to understand, and they danced faster.

"Drinks are ready!" Reno shouted.

They stopped dancing. Ghost pressed a hand against his chest and gasped for breath. Jess was breathing hard and laughing. They returned to the bar and climbed to the stools. Ghost slumped over the bar.

Reno poured the drinks and lifted his glass. "To beautiful people who know how to live and aren't ugly about life!"

They drank. Ghost coughed and clutched a hand to his throat. "Powerful!"

"May we all fly to the moon."

"To bad tempers," Ghost said. "May they never cause unhappiness."

"To unhappiness."

"Fill 'em again, Reno."

"Mud in yer eye."

"To anything at all."

"To everything."

"To the impossible," Jess said. The smile had left her face

and the sadness was back in her eyes. "No," she said. "To Ghost."

"To me."

They drained the glasses. Reno filled them again, then weaved away and stood at the sink, dunking glasses.

"What's a matter, Reno." Ghost's voice was thickening.

"I'm a sorehead."

"Nothing more to drink to?"

Reno staggered back. He eyed them both, then lifted his glass. "I drink to you both. You're good people."

"Right!"

They drank again. Reno filled the glasses. He wheeled away to stare drunkedly into the sink. Ghost leaned close to Jess. He narrowed his eyes and his tone was confidential. "I have a toast."

She blinked and swayed on the stool. She giggled and steadied herself with a hand on the bar. "What's that?"

"It's a wish."

"So, okay, wish."

"I wish you would believe me when I say you have a hell-uva lot of talent and not think I'm trying to make a pass."

"I believe you—that you're not trying to make a pass."

"Jess." Ghost put his glass down. He blinked to focus his eyes and took a deep breath. He sighed. "Jess," he repeated.

"Yes?"

"Jess, lissen. Believe me. Know what I mean? B'lieve me. B'lieve me in everything."

"Not possible."

"Jess, lissen, lissen, Y'hear. I mean it. You gotta believe me."

"I can't."

"Ahhhhhhh, Jess!"

"I think you're a lovely guy."

"Oh, yeah?" He grinned, his head flopped to one side. His elbow slipped on the bar, and he caught himself and straightened, overdoing it in the manner of a drunk.

"Yeah."

"To Jess." Ghost reached for his glass and lifted it. "Who I love."

She lifted and made a face at him. "To Ghost—who I love."

"Right!" He drank. "Right! For ever and ever, right!"

Reno came reeling along the bar. "What's right?"

Ghost turned and blinked at Reno. He grinned. "I love 'er," he said.

"You know," Reno said, "that's a powerful drink."

They all burst into laughter and could not stop. They leaned on the bar and laughed. Ghost beat his palm against the wood, and when they stopped Reno said, "What's so funny," and they were convulsed again. Ghost fell off the stool and struggled to keep his feet, still laughing. He grasped the bar and held himself up. The laughter gradually subsided, then died, leaving them gasping for breath.

"How much I owe you, Reno?"

"Next time," Reno said.

"Okay. Jess—" He helped her off the stool. She touched the floor and her knees buckled. Ghost held her and lifted her.

"You all right?"

"Sure. But something's wrong with the floor." She began to giggle.

"C'mon, we'll get a cab."

"Stop tilting the floor." Jess turned and leaned on the bar. "G'night, Reno. I think you're awful sweet."

Reno looked with sad eyes, as though he were about to cry. "You too," he said. "Come back, huh?"

"I'll be back."

"Let's go, Jess."

"G'bye, Reno."

"G'night."

Ghost held her in his arms, and together they staggered to the door.

CHAPTER FOUR

"HERE WE are," the driver said.

"Wha?"

"I said, here we are. This is the address."

Ghost shook his head. He had been asleep. Jess was cradled in his arms, her head against his chest. He shook her awake. "Jess, c'mon, we're here."

"Uh?"

"We're here, c'mon wake up."

She yawned and stretched. She shook her head slowly and groaned. Ghost opened the door and helped her out. He leaned back into the cab. "How much?"

"Two-fifty."

He gave the driver three dollars and closed the door. He put his arms around Jess and steadied her. The cab pulled away.

"You okay?"

"I'm fine, only the ground is very shaky."

The Westwood Section was embraced in the silence of

night, suburban enough for the steady drone of cicada and cricket, bird warble and beetle staccatto. The apartment house was somber and dark. It was a two-story structure built in a "U" around a kidney-shaped swimming pool. Dull lamps lighted the network of concrete walks.

"Which one is it?" Ghost asked.

"Up there." She pointed to the second floor balcony.

"Way up there?"

Jess giggled and leaned heavily against him. "Let's fly," she said.

"We may have to crawl." He held her tightly. They crossed the walk, skirting the pool and approached the steps. "You know, it's a very nice night."

"It's a lovely night," Jess said.

They started up the steps, taking them slowly. Jess leaned back against Ghost. "Easy now," he said.

"You won't let me fall."

"That's right, Princess. You can lean on me any old time."

Jess stopped on the next step and turned. She placed both hands on Ghost's shoulders. She looked down into his face. Her expression was serious, wistful. "I'll bet a lot of people lean on you," she said. "That's because you're a leaner-oner type. Did you know that some people are leaners and other people are leaner-oners? It's true."

"It must be—if you say so."

"It's true." She turned and went up the steps without his help. They reached the top and walked lightly along the balcony. Jess stopped at her door.

"Do you have a key?"

"It isn't locked," she said. "I hate locked doors, and I hate keys."

Ghost opened the door. Jess entered and he followed her. The room was dark and Ghost ran his hand along the wall by the door, searching for the light switch.

"Don't turn it on," Jess said.

Ghost lowered his hand and turned to her. She came to him and leaned against him. She lifted her hands to his face. She kissed him lightly.

"Your lips are soft," she said.

"Jess—"

"Shhh." She kissed him again, barely touching his lips with

hers. His arms went about her, but she pulled away. She held him at arms length, staring at him. She turned, taking his hand. She led him across the room and into the bedroom. She let him go, went to the table by the bed and switched on a lamp. She came back, led him to the bed and made him sit down.

"Now don't move," she said. She touched her hand to his face. "I'll be ready for you in a minute. Just smoke a cigarette or something." She stood erect, then turned and moved away. He scowled, watching her. She went to the bathroom. She switched on the light, then stood in the doorway. "You won't be sorry," she said. "I'll make you happy. I like you." She turned and closed the door.

Ghost knotted his fists and stared at them. He closed his eyes, trying to drive the thoughts from his mind. He felt sick in the pit of his stomach, a bilious distaste that spread through him. He got to his feet slowly and stood by the bed, staring at the closed door. He wanted to scream an obscenity, but he was silent. He crossed the room and opened the door. Jess was knotting the belt of her bathrobe. She turned and smiled.

"Can't you wait a minute? I have to make myself look pretty, don't I?"

"Jess—" His voice was filled with anguish.

She took a perfume bottle from a shelf, tilted it to her finger and dabbed her ears. She held the bottle out to him. "Doesn't that smell good?"

He shook his head slowly. "Jess, don't—"

The smile left her face. "Don't I appeal to you? I'm not your type?"

He bowed his head and took a deep breath. He did not look at her. "You are my type," he said.

"Then I don't understand. I didn't even have a chance with you. How do you know you wouldn't like it?"

He lifted his head and stared at her. He closed his eyes. "Jess . . . look . . . I . . . I . . . oh, hell."

"Well?"

"Jess, I feel . . . I . . . oh, Jess, whoever told you that you have to do this to reach someone?" His expression was pained, and he felt pain.

"What are you trying to say?" Her voice was bitter.

"I'm saying . . . dammit, Jess. . . ." He looked at the

ceiling, his voice rising on a note of desperation and anger. " . . . I'm saying that one time, just one time, it's got to be right! I'm saying that I met a girl who was everything I ever thought about in a girl. I met a girl who stripped away all the dirty things I ever did or heard. I had a vision. It was a damned fool thing, maybe, but goddammit, I want my vision!"

"Loving is considered normal."

"Oh, Man, who have you been talking to?"

"I've lived."

"Great! That's just great!" He turned away and walked into the bedroom. She followed him. He turned and faced her. His voice was soft. "Jess, you don't have to do this to have me love you. You're too good for this kind of scene."

"Are you kidding?" The bitterness was back. The wall was up around her. "Where do I stand, without my body? I'm the girl with no mind, or haven't you heard? What good is talking when no one listens? What good is falling for someone when they never come back? If I let you go tonight and just said So Long, I'd never see you again. And you know it."

He didn't want to talk. He was angry and he didn't want to say the words of hurt. He didn't want to lose the dream. So damn few dreams. "I'll see you tomorrow," he said. "Keep the day open."

She lifted her hand to him. Her eyes were frightened, and her voice trembled. "Ghost—"

"Don't, Jess. Please."

"Don't go."

"Tomorrow, huh?"

"Ghost—" It was a whisper.

"You don't know how it is with me, Jess. Maybe you'll know. Maybe." He backed away to the door.

"Please, don't go."

"I'll see you tomorrow." His hand was on the door knob, turning it. "About two."

"I'll pick you up about two." He opened the door. "Okay?"

Her head was bowed. The blonde hair spilled over her shoulders. She nodded her head slowly. He turned and closed the door after him. He heard the phone ring. He stood for a moment listening. The phone continued to

ring. She did not answer. The ringing ceased. He walked along the balcony and down the steps.

He stopped at the pool and stared into the water. There was a slight breeze and it rippled the water. He turned away and followed the concrete walk to the street. He walked with slow, dragging steps. His hands were balled into his pockets.

Oh, you mother'n world, he said to himself, what do you do to us? You grind us down to nothing. He walked with his shoulders slumped. There's something wrong with it all, he thought, something damned wrong. He wanted to blame something or someone. But what was it? It was They. They. That damned faceless, formless They. They do it. They did it. Why can't They get off our backs? Life, the World, the System, They. He tilted his head and stared up at the sky. It was a panoply of stars against charcoal gray. Ragged clouds scudded across a half moon. Was there a God?

He thought of Jess and himself, and the one thing he knew they had in common. The desperate need for love, the hunger of belief. He remembered some lines of Billie Holiday's. They had always stuck in his mind. *I want to get it over with real quick*, she had said. *I want to die soon. Why? I got no guy. Sure, they love my singing. But me? I'm tired. I'm human. I want to be loved.*

What the hell kind of jazz is this? he asked, staring up, trying to look beyond the universe. Man, we don't ask for so much. Just wanta swing, that's all. Want something clean and good, that's all. And we get our faces pushed into the mud until we start scrounging and hustling and clawing like every other bastard under the sun. It don't make sense, Man, it just don't.

He shook his head and kept walking.

CHAPTER FIVE

GHOST HAD walked all night, walked through the smog mist that cloaked the city, walked all the way downtown to Fifth and Main. He had coffee in too-bright Drive-Ins, and stared at the tired waitresses and the screechy-voiced day-sleeping night girls in leather booths. And he had walked back to Hollywood. He had watched the sky gray, then turn pale, then brighten with the morning sun. He had watched the city come awake, watched the houses spawn humanity, the factory-bound, the office-bound. He had listened to the timorous sounds of awakening rise to a roar as the millions came to grapple with the day.

His tie was pulled loose, and he needed a shave. His eyes were tinged with red. He was tired, but good-tired, and filled with a muscle-weary exhilaration. It was day, and so long as it was day, there seemed a chance.

He walked north on Vine Street, walked through the city sounds of morning, walked in the channel of one man's

world within WORLD. He moved on the wave of sound, feeling no concrete, listening, digging it. It was way out. Discordant auto-horn solos making it against the engine-voice-shoe leather-slapping rhythm, beat--beat, staccato riveter riffs from skeletal new buildings, sounds, the music of sweat and anger and love and blood beating through the veins.

"Yeah," he said to himself, "yeah." His fingers itched as his mind worked the cacophony into chords. He jammed his hands into his pockets and walked with a slouch, bent forward, his eyes on the sidewalk. The crowd moved against him, but he was out of it, did not see the faces. He walked straight ahead and the people cleaved around him like water passing a rock. "Yes," he muttered, "oh, yes, yes!" This was the sound. This was what the group would say. This was hunger, the sounds of hunger. Hunger for love, for money, for time, for everything. This was jazz, this was what jazz MEANT. Guts, all guts. This was not the phony bleating of a sick watered horn. This was IT.

When he reached the hotel on Hudson Street he bounded up the steps and stalked across the small lobby to the stairs. It was a cheap hotel—fifty a month in advance and no questions asked. It was too early for the lobby sitters, the lonely, the lost, the bewildered, the hustlers marking time, the kids with nervous eyes. The desk clerk gave him a cursory glance and went back to his books. The place smelled of pine oil and age and the thousands who had paused for a moment, and the strange odor of hotel carpeting. Ghost started up the steps, a hand on the rail, his footsteps muffled by the carpet. On the second flight his progress was blocked by a redhaired girl coming down. She paused in front of him and smiled.

"Hiya, Ghost."

"Hi, Helen."

"Long time no see. Where ya been?"

"Around, you know." He tried to move around her and she turned with him, thrusting out her chest to make it difficult.

"Why don't ja drop in sometime?"

He edged past her and backed up the steps. "I'll do that."

"I'm still in 306."

"That's swell. I'll see ya, huh?"

"How about tonight?"

"Well, I got a gig on tonight," he lied.

"Oh, yeah? Where? I'll drop in."

"It's a private party."

The smile left her face. "Ah, that's too bad." She brightened. "Well, anytime, huh? Just knock."

"Okay. I'll see ya, huh?"

"Okay, Ghost."

He turned and went on up the stairs. He turned along the mustard-colored hallway. Someone coughed. A toilet flushed. A female voice screeched in anger. Home sweet home, Ghost murmured, laughing to himself. He unlocked the door to his room, went in and closed it after him. He crossed the room, pulling off his clothes. He jerked the window shade to shut out the light. He put his suit on a hanger, tossed the shirt on a chair. That Helen, he thought, she's sure coming on strong. I'll give Red the word. She's got a great build.

He crawled into the bed, turned on his side, and was asleep. He awoke to an earthquake.

Red stood at the foot of the bed blowing *reveille* on his trumpet. Shelley bounded up and down, using the bed like a trampoline. Red marched around the room, adding jazz licks to the bugle call. The bed springs wailed as Shelley hit them. "Wheeee!" Shelley rose in the air, tried to touch the ceiling. Ghost scurried to the head of the bed.

"Cut it out!"

"Wheeee!" The sound of Shelley's bouncing was a deep *Thung* and the screech of tortured wire, then a *Whup* as he rose into the air. Thung, screech, Whup. "Wheee!" And all the time Red jamming the bugle call. Thung, screech, Whup.

"Cut it out!" Ghost bellowed.

Red lowered the horn. Shelley hit the bed and stopped. They looked at him with astonishment. "What's wrong?"

"You trying to ruin me? For crissake, I was asleep. I'll have a goddamn heart attack. You nuts or something?"

They both grinned. "It's time to get up," Red said.

"Thanks."

"Anytime. Anything for a buddy."

"Jesus," Ghost said, "what lunatics."

"That's because we're creative," Red said.

"Yeah," Shelley said.

"Get off the bed."

"He's antagonistic," Shelley said to Red.

"Well," Red said, "that's because he's insecure. He has a repressed neurotic need for power. His compulsive anxieties are exhibited in an irrational hostility."

"He must be creative," Shelley said.

Ghost threw a pillow, hitting Shelley in the face. Red hooted and Shelley leaped forward. Red blew the Cavalry Charge on his horn. Shelley wrestled Ghost on the bed, both of them grunting and laughing. Red put down his horn. He thumped his chest and imitated Tarzan's call, then he ran and leaped onto the bed. The three of them wrestled themselves to the floor, and separated, gasping, laughing, choking on the laughter.

"You awake?" Red asked, finally.

"I think so," Ghost said. He lifted himself from the floor and went to the closet-like bathroom. Red and Shelley followed him and stood in the doorway.

"We waited at the Greek's for you last night," Red said. Ghost splashed water on his face. "We were coming by here when we run into Harry Stacey. Y'know, Stacey, he blows bass with Muggsey." Ghost dried his face, felt the stubble of beard, and reached for his soap and razor. "Yeah," Red went on, "he said you left Baby's party with some chick. He was at the party."

"That right?" Ghost began soaping his chin.

Red winked at Shelley. "The old Ghost ain't talking," Red said. "Who the chick, Ghost?"

Ghost inserted a new blade into the razor. He leaned his chin towards the mirror. "A girl," he said.

Red grinned and nudged Shelley. "That Ghost," he said, "now he say to his boys, 'Don't mess with the chicks.' He say, 'All the chicks bad news.' Yessir, he's got the word. No chicks for old Ghost." They laughed together.

"He's real cool," Shelley said. He tapped his hands against the wall.

"C'mon, Man!" Red shouted, "Let's hear it! Who'd you make it with?"

"Stay loose," Ghost said, pausing in his shaving, "It was nothing."

"She have her own pad?" Red asked.

"Cool it, will ya, Red?"

Red laughed. "Oh, Shelley, Man, get the Ghost. Cool it, he says. He makes it with a chick and he says, cool it. How about that!"

Ghost turned and glowered at Red. "It ain't like that," he said.

Red sobered. He stared back at Ghost. "Whatta you mean, Man?"

"I mean this ain't no broad."

"Jesus," Red said. "I mean, like, wow." He shook his head as though unable to believe. "You're kidding."

"I said that about Marion," Shelley said, "and look at me. I'm like married."

"Wow!" Red exclaimed. "Shelley, just get this cat. The great Ghost has gone over!"

"Get off it, huh?" Ghost went back to his shaving.

Red and Shelley watched him another few minutes in silence, then they went into the bedroom and waited. They sat and stared in silence while Ghost dressed. He turned on them. "What's the matter? I met a girl. So what?"

They both grinned, but said nothing. He shook his head and went back to dressing. "What time is it?"

"Almost one," Red said.

"Jesus," Ghost exclaimed. "I gotta get moving."

"We got plenty of time," Red said. "We don't play until two-thirty."

"I gotta pick Jess up at two," Ghost said.

"Ha-ha! So she don't mean nothing."

"Get off it, huh? C'mon, let's get outta here. I need some coffee."

Red packed his horn. Shelley beat a riff on the door with his knuckles. They left the room, the hall, the stairs, the lobby. They walked the half block to Hollywood Boulevard and turned into a coffee shop. They took a booth, ate and talked. They talked music: "I have trouble answering Charlie on that first chorus of *Paper Moon*. He works in a lot of chromatics that I don't dig." "We'll work it out this afternoon." They talked work: "I met this guy last night said he might get us a gig in Long Beach." "Playing waltzes?" "Nah. He's got a joint down there." "No joints. We gotta go big." They talked girls: "That Redhead, you know the one, lives on my floor. Name's, Helen." The big

one?" "That's her. Crazy, huh?" "Wow, Man, that's for me."

They went to the cashier and Ghost paid the bill. On the sidewalk he asked, "Can I hit either of you for five? I only got a deuce."

"I'm clean, Man," Red said.

"I can let you have a deuce," Shelley said. He took two dollars from his pocket and handed it to Ghost.

"I gotta go out to Westwood," Ghost said. "Where you guys headed?"

"We're going to my pad," Red said. "I gotta drop off this horn and pick up my bass."

"How you doing with the horn?"

"You heard me, Man."

"You better stick to the bass."

Red shook his head and looked at Shelley. "No appreciation," he said.

"He just ain't creative," Shelley said.

"I gotta get a bus," Ghost said. "See you at the park."

"Stay cool, Man," Red said.

Ghost left them at the corner. He caught a bus, got off three blocks from Jess' apartment, and walked.

The pool was busy. Ghost passed the sun worshippers and climbed the stairs to the balcony. He went to Jess' door and knocked. He heard movement inside, then the door opened.

"Hi," he said.

"You really meant it," she said.

"I'm the sincere type," he said. He entered the apartment and she closed the door. He turned. She was leaning back against the door. His eyes moved over her slowly. The blonde hair framing the delicately featured face that was almost too beautiful, the soft-textured skin that was lightly tanned, the long, slender neck, the high-collar print blouse that thrust over the high, full breasts and plunged to the narrow waist, the orange slacks that hugged the rounded hips and dropped along the long legs. "You're even more beautiful in the daylight," he said.

"Oh, Ghost—" she said.

He caught her as she moved into his arms and held her tightly, breathing into her hair.

CHAPTER SIX

THEY WERE playing *Blues After Dark*. Pete had his trumpet muted and he stood hunched over, the horn pointing at the floor of the small stage. He blew, repeating the unison riffs with Charlie answering with the supporting chords. They developed the second theme together, maintaining the simple melody. It was a slow beat, mournful. The rhythm filled the background. Pete took the first solo, lifting his horn and blowing out into the emptiness of the park. Charlie took the second solo, then Pete and Charlie handed it back and forth. Shelley's strong beat held it all together. Ghost took a solo, picking out the single notes of the theme, backing it with soft chords. Then they went back to the unison riffs and the general theme.

When they finished, Charlie wiped at his mouth with the handkerchief he always held in his hands. "Man," he said, "this is for the birds!"

"Come on, Charlie," Red said, "stop talking to the audience."

Pete laughed and Charlie nodded. Shelley sat waiting, hovering over his drums. Ghost fiddled with some chords and smiled at Jess who sat in a chair by the piano. They were clustered in the center of a small band shell. The seats before them were empty.

Ghost played the opening chords of *Wide Open Spaces*. Shelley picked up the beat and Red joined in. Charlie started at the top and blew down into the guttural blues. Pete let Charlie complete the solo ride, then joined him to trade choruses. The two faced each other and blew fervently. They were swinging. Ghost added some funky touches, and gave it back to the horns. The two battled head-to-head, then Charlie rode off, searching for things that made Pete stop and grin. Charlie lowered his tenor, let it hang, and Ghost nodded to Red for a solo.

"Man," Charlie said with disgust, mopping his face and talking above the music, "you reach for a high one, and for what? For nobody!"

"I liked it, Charlie," Red said.

"If you tried *playing* it for awhile, maybe we'd all like it," Ghost said.

"Come on, stop complaining," Shelley said.

They finished the number. There was silence for a moment.

"Why complain," Red said. "Look what we got. Fresh air, sunshine, a quiet place. This is exactly what I had in mind when I joined the Union."

"It's for the birds," Charlie growled. "The charity bits, now, they're a drag, but at least you've got an audience. But this—" He waved his arm at the empty park.

"You're getting paid," Shelley said.

"Scale," Charlie said. "They pay more loot to the playground supervisors."

"So learn to play basketball!" Shelley hooted, hitting the cymbal and grinning.

"Ah, crap!" Charlie said. He raised his horn and began to blow again.

Ghost looked at Jess and shrugged. "We usually do much better," he said. He turned his head to the group. "What's with you guys?"

"Just tired," Shelley said.

Charlie lowered the tenor. "You mean tired of playing to trees, that's all. Now if I played the tuba and Shelley a bass drum, we'd have a crowd in no time."

"Get off it, will ya, Charlie," Ghost said. He turned back to Jess. "The end of a perfect day," he said.

"I've had it," Charlie said. He unhooked his horn and walked to where his instrument case lay. He removed the mouthpiece and began packing the horn.

Pete shrugged and Ghost said, "Oh, well, what the hell. It's a bad day. Let's knock it off."

They broke it up and packed the instruments. Charlie and Ghost helped Shelley with his drums. They left the bandstand and angled across the park to where Pete's car was parked. A short distance from the bandstand, Charlie turned and said, "Goodbye, Park, you're strictly for the birds."

"C'mon," Ghost said.

They walked in a cluster, lugging the instruments. It hadn't been a good session, but at least it was practice, and Ghost felt good. He looked across at Jess. She was carrying Shelley's snare case and cymbal. Red and Shelley flanked her, talking animatedly, and as she laughed, they increased their antics to please her. The group liked her. Even old sour Charlie seemed to like her. He felt good about that. He wanted them to like her. A girl can foul up a combo. One broad, just one that's good and bitchy, and she can raise more hell than all the temperament put together.

Walking the direct path to the car, they crossed a baseball diamond. Near home plate they passed a group of young teen-agers in baseball uniforms. The kids were arguing.

"What's the score?" Red yelled.

"No score," one of the kids yelled back. "The other team's chicken. They didn't show up."

Red turned back to the group. "Who wants to play ball?"

"With them?" Pete asked.

"Agh," Charlie griped, "we're too old for that jazz. Wanta have a heart attack or something?"

"C'mon," Red shouted. He ran to the side of the ball diamond and lowered the cumbersome bass to the ground.

"You guys ballplayers?" one of the kids asked.

"Man, we're the best!" Shelley shouted. He was putting his drums with the bass.

"You guys crazy?" Charlie shouted.

"C'mon," Ghost said, joining in, "these kid teams are supposed to be pretty good."

Charlie shook his head and shrugged, but then he was in it, and he shouted to the kids. "Hey, we only got five guys."

"So what? You guys are big guys. Ya wanna play or not?"

"Nice kid," Charlie said.

"We'll knock yer ears off!" a kid hooted.

"Sez you."

"C'mon, let's go," Shelley shouted. He was dancing around on the field.

"Let's have that old ball," Red shouted. The ball was thrown to him. He caught it, whirled and tossed it to Shelley. Shelley threw it to Charlie.

"You feel athletic?" Ghost asked Jess.

"No thanks," she said. "You go ahead. I'll watch."

Ghost winked and ran onto the field. He leaped and took the ball out of the air.

"Man, lookit the old Ghost!"

"Get that man!"

Ghost was chosen to pitch. Charlie played first. Red covered second, short and third. Pete and Shelley were in the outfield. They had borrowed gloves from the kids.

"Batter up!"

A youngster walked to the plate and flexed the bat. He faced Ghost. "All right," he shouted, "I'll drive it down your throat."

Ghost pitched the ball. The kid belted it. It was high and Red came under it for the out. They retired the side, and the kids took the field. Ghost hit a double, Charlie pushed him to third with a single, and Red scored a home-run on a series of fumbling errors.

"Three to nothing!" Shelley shouted, coming to bat. "What's the matter with you guys."

The game went on for three innings. Red and Shelley were clowning for Jess' benefit and the kids managed to

score several runs. When they came to bat for the fourth time, the score was 5 to 3. Pete hit towards third and managed to run to first. Charlie came up. The pitcher hit him with the ball and he took first base. Ghost struck out. Shelley got a hit, but twisted his ankle and fell before he reached first and was tagged out.

"Jess, you get up there," Ghost said.

"But I don't know anything about the game," Jess squealed.

Ghost picked up the bat and put it in her hands and led her to the plate.

"Yah!" the pitcher shouted. "Ya got a girl playing withya. Whatta bunch of sissies!"

"C'mon, throw the ball!" Red shouted.

"Throw the ball!"

"Belt it outta the park, Jess!"

The pitcher threw the ball. Jess screamed and tried to get out of the way. She spun half around. The ball hit the bat and rolled towards third.

"Run, Jess!"

"Go, girl!"

"Foul, foul!"

Ghost whooped. He grabbed Jess by the hand and ran with her, dragging her along down the first base line. She touched the bag, then suddenly turned and began to run back to home plate.

"No! No! That's the wrong way! Jess, run to second! To second. To second."

She ran in circles, screaming, laughing. The kids threw the ball away again and again. Both Ghost and Red were running Jess down to second. Charlie and Pete joined in. They ran her to third. The kids were shouting and fumbling the ball. They ran her across home plate.

"The slugger!"

"Sign this girl up!"

They were all hugging her and laughing. Red and Shelley lifted her to their shoulders and marched her around. Jess gasped for breath, but she beamed with happiness.

"C'mon," the pitcher said, "you guys gonna play or not?"

"We've had it, kid," Charlie said. He tapped his chest. "We're just too old."

"That's a forfeit!"

"You lose, then."

"Okay, kids, we lose," Charlie said. "That's something we're used to."

"Aghhh!"

"Go find a girl's team," Red said.

They gathered the instruments and moved off. They were still congratulating Jess when they reached the car. They loaded the drums and bass. Charlie said Goodbye and walked off. Pete got behind the wheel. Shelley and Red squeezed in around the instruments.

"See you guys," Ghost said.

"Hey, there's room," Red said. "Squeeze in."

"No," Ghost said. "We're gonna walk a bit. You go ahead."

"Where we see ya?"

"At the Greek's," Ghost said.

"Tonight?"

"Sure."

"Okay, Man." Red was leaning across Pete and talking through the car window. "Hey, Jess?"

"Yes?"

"You're okay."

Jess flushed. It was a simple statement, but the sincerity was unmistakable. "Well . . . well, thank you, Red."

"See you around, huh?"

They drove off, waving. Ghost and Jess turned and began to walk across the grass. They were silent, then Jess said, "I don't know when I've had so much fun."

"Me too."

"You know, Mr. Wakefield, that's quite a group. You play real fine."

"It was an off day. But they're a good bunch."

"They're wonderful. They make you feel so . . . so . . . well, I don't know . . ."

"They liked you," Ghost said.

"I'm glad."

When they left the park they took the streetcar to Santa Monica and walked on the boardwalk, and ate hotdogs, and looked at the ocean from the fishing pier, and watched the gymnasts on the beach in the fading light of day. They sat

in the sand and watched the sunset and talked. Like people do when they want someone to know them, they talked about their past. About mothers and fathers, brothers, sisters. School, first dates. Little fears. Insecurities. Triumphs. They talked the sun into the ocean, and then they were silent in the wonder of the fiery sky that seemed to explode from the sea, and in the knowledge of each other.

It was dark when they got back to Jess' apartment. They stood at the edge of the pool. Jess turned her face up and Ghost smiled at her. "Hi, slugger," he said.

She laughed lightly and moved into his arms. Ghost kissed her lightly. He ran his lips over her cheek, overwhelmed by the closeness of her, the depth of his feeling for her. He looked beyond her. Something moved in the shadow of the stairs, and he stiffened suddenly. The movement was furtive.

"What's the matter?" Jess asked.

"Wait a minute." He could make out the shadow of a figure pressed against the building in the darkness. He began to move towards the stairs, Jess behind him. The figure stepped from the shadows.

"Benny," Ghost said.

"Hi," Benny said. "Hi, Jess." He seemed embarrassed. "I'm sorry. I came looking for you, Ghost. I wanted to tell you I got an audition for the group tomorrow at Gold Star. Four o'clock. Sorry to interrupt. This is pretty embarrassing."

Ghost laughed. "Man, you startled me, standing there in the dark."

"Yeah . . . well . . . ah . . . I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you. Just wanted to make sure you made the audition."

"Come in and have a drink with us," Ghost said. "That's okay, isn't it, Jess?"

"Of course," Jess said.

"No, no," Benny said, "I've got a date." He seemed to be working at the story as he went along. "I gotta go home and change my clothes first." He avoided Ghost's eyes. "By the way, Jess," he added, "I don't know what we're going to do about getting you some work. I know you need rent money, and you're pretty low on change. I'd like to line something up for you somewhere, but when you walked

out on me last night I was just about to introduce you to some people."

Ghost bridled. Benny was rubbing it in, telling Jess that she had chosen the wrong guy. "Don't worry about Jess, Benny. She's going to sing with our group."

Benny's eyes flickered between the two. There was a sudden trace of anger, but he cooled it. "Now let's not lose our heads," he said. "Jess needs money, but your group is instrumental, and she's just starting out."

"I told you I think she's great."

"Well," Benny said, irritated, "it's up to you, I guess." He glared at Jess. He looked back to Ghost. "Don't forget," he said, "four o'clock. Gold Star Records. Know where it is?"

"I'll find it."

"Well, okay. Goodnight, Jess. Sorry if I caused you any embarrassment."

"Goodnight, Benny," Jess said. She pushed past him her jaw set, and went up the stairs. Ghost paused a minute. Benny did not move. Ghost scowled, then went up the stairs after Jess. She strode along the balcony and entered the apartment, leaving the door ajar. Ghost followed her in and closed the door.

Jess stood in the middle of the room with her back to him. She stood with her head bowed just slightly. Her arms were crossed over her breast. He waited by the door.

"What's the matter, Jess?"

She said nothing, did not move. He moved from the door. He crossed the room and stood in front of her, his head cocked.

"Is something wrong, Jess?"

She shook her head, but did not look up. He reached out and put his finger under her chin, and lifted her face. He tried to laugh it off, bring back her mood. "Hey, come on, what's bothering you." She jerked her head away, so that her eyes would not meet his.

"Was it, Benny?"

She took a deep breath. "Ghost," she said, "look—" She did not go on. Her voice faltered.

"Yeah?"

"Ghost, look, just go out the door, huh? Please. Just leave and forget this ever happened."

"Hey, what is this?" He reached out for her and gripped her arms. "Jess, I love you."

"You don't know me."

"I know me," he said. "I know what I want. I know I want you."

"Look," she said, her voice hard. turning to face him. "Let me have today. Let me keep it just like it was. Let's not run it into the dirt."

"I don't get you, Jess."

"Of course you don't," she said, bitterly. "You're a nice guy. You want a nice girl."

"So?"

"Look, just how do you think I met Benny? It was in a bar on the Strip. I wasn't there selling peanuts. I don't work at a job. How do you think I pay the rent here?" She hurled the words at him. He stood unmoving and made no answer. "I have friends," she said, "friends like Benny. I'm nice to them, and I get presents. And someone picks up the phone bill, and someone else takes care of P G & E. and someone else takes care of the booze, and someone else gets up the rent. I've been around the block a few times."

"Jess—"

"Let me finish."

"Jess, it doesn't mean anything."

"It means I'm not for you. In your league I'm a tramp."

"Jess, listen to me for a minute. I've known women before you. I couldn't begin to remember them all. But now, now, Jess, when I'm with you it's as though it's the first time I've ever been near a woman. How could I possibly ever condemn you for anything you've done when I know I've done as much and more. I don't give a damn what you were to Benny or anyone else. I only know what you are to me, and that's what matters."

She brought her hands to her face. Her shoulders shook. He did not try to touch her or soothe her. He let her cry.

"I love you, Jess," he said.

She lifted her face and her eyes were stained with tears. She bit at her lip. "I don't know if I could be in love with you," she said, the words coming in halting spasms. "I don't know if I know what love is."

"You know. Just accept it. Don't think about it."

"Oh, Ghost—" She fell into his arms and he embraced her.

"And don't worry about Benny," he said. "And don't worry about tomorrow, because from now on it's gonna be there."

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE RECORDING studio still retained many of the features of the warehouse it had once been. It was a one-story, concrete block with a sloping roof, a long rectangular building. It had once been painted white, but some previous owner had added a coat of whitewash that the rain had destroyed, and now the outside walls had the look of malignant disease. The roof was corrugated metal and streaks of rust on the walls added to the look of disreputation. It was a short block off Sunset Boulevard.

Ghost looked at the small sign beside the front door. "This is it," he said to Jess. He opened the door and they stepped inside. There was a small, untidy waiting room, and a glass-enclosed receptionist's booth. The booth was empty. Directly ahead was a blue door with the sign: *Studio* painted there in gold, and another sign, this one cardboard and hand lettered that said: *Keep this goddammed door shut.* Ghost went to the door and opened it.

The rest of the group were already there. They lounged in straight-backed chairs and smoked. The light was bright, and the smoke was a blue haze. Benny paced nervously and talked to a man with the look of a business type. False ceilings had been lowered from the roof and covered with celotex. Wall partitions transformed the warehouse into a large room. Lights, microphones and wires cluttered the room. There was a large black piano. A table sat in the center of the room and there were two dozen chairs. Strictly a pick-up outfit. In one wall was the glass window of the control booth. The face of the engineer was there, bored as only sound engineers can be bored. Ghost and Jess crossed the room.

"Here he is," Benny said, twisting the cigar from his mouth and gesturing with it. "Here he is." Benny came forward.

The group turned. They waved and greeted Ghost and Jess. Benny took Ghost by the arm. "Where the hell ya been?" he whispered.

"Couldn't find the place."

"I toldja last night. I asked ya."

"So we're here. Stay loose, Man."

Benny turned on a smile. He stopped before the business type. "Milt Frielobe," he said in his agent's voice of supreme confidence and gaiety, "I want you to meet the leader of the cult."

"Leader of the cult?"

"The leader of the cult," Benny repeated, "Ghost Wakefield."

They shook hands. "This is Princess Jess Polanski," Ghost said.

"Happy to meet you," Jess said.

"Charmed," Frielobe said, smiling, looking her over carefully and holding her hand a bit too long. "You sing, sweetie?"

"Yeah," Ghost said, annoyed by the man, "she sings. She's great. Doesn't even need lyrics."

Frielobe had released Jess' hand. His eyebrows came up and he turned to Benny. "No lyrics?"

Benny took the ball. "Look, Milt," he said, "how many commercial records have lyrics today? They all have one line repetition with a rock and a bock underneath. I-

love-you-and-you-love-me-and-ain't-that-mystery kind of lyric."

"So?" Frielobe was suspicious.

"So we ain't got that kind of lyric." Ghost was annoyed. He wanted to turn and walk out. How could this fink possibly understand what they were going to play? Impossible. A waste of time to even try.

"Now, listen, Benny—" Frielobe began. He had already known too many musicians, and he knew what sold.

Ghost had glanced over to where the boys were sitting. They were grimacing and shaking their heads at him. He said to Frielobe: "We can show you better than telling you about it."

"What do we go with?" Shelley said quickly.

Ghost moved away from Frielobe. "I taught the Princess the Blues," he said.

"Yeah?" Pete said, grinning, "When are you gonna teach me."

"You'll learn," Ghost said. He sat at the piano, and began to finger the melody. "You remember this," he said to Charlie who nodded and fingered the keys of his horn. Red picked up the beat on the bass and Shelley joined in, using the brushes on the cymbal. Charlie lifted his horn to his lips and began to blow. Pete listened, then nodded his head and brought the trumpet up. He bowed his head and added his horn to Charlie's tenor. They played a chorus, then Jess began to sing, adding her voice to the instrumentation, working in patterns in and around the horns. She missed a note and began to tense. Ghost smiled at her.

"Kill it!" Frielobe said.

"Kill it!" Benny shouted.

The music ceased, and Ghost said, "What's the matter?"

"I don't like the number. Too much lilt."

"You mean too easy?" Ghost asked.

"Too soft."

Ghost grinned and turned to the others. He shrugged and lifted his hands, palms up, as though to say, what can you do with a fink like this?

"Hey," Pete said, "give us a chance to paint the scenery."

"I don't like it," Frielobe said.

"Now wait a minute," Ghost snapped, turning to Frielobe.

"You pay for it and that's all. We play what we like. That's the deal."

"That's not my deal, kid."

"It's not?" Ghost glared at Benny and began to rise from the piano stool.

Benny still had his smile on, but the panic was in the eyes. The Hollywood panic that is worn like a cashmere suit. "Let me handle this, Milt," he said.

"Look," Frielobe said, his jaw set, "maybe the best thing to do is forget the whole thing. Maybe some other time when we're—"

"Now, wait," Benny said, "now wait just a second. Just let me talk to you for two minutes."

"Sure, Benny. Hell, I'm no heavy." He looked at Ghost. "But I want what I want, and I happen to know—"

"What the public wants," Ghost said, finishing his sentence.

"That's right!" Frielobe snapped.

"Now wait a minute," Benny said. "Milt, c'mere, I gotta talk to you." He turned the man by the arm and led him to the control booth. Behind the glass they could be seen talking, Benny waving his hands, gesturing with the cigar, smiling, and Frielobe stubborn and shaking his head.

"The end of another perfect day," Charlie said.

"I'm sorry," Jess said.

"About what?"

"It was my fault."

"Come off it, Honey," Charlie said. "You were great."

"What's the deal, Ghost? Do we try something else?"

"No," Ghost said, staring at the control booth, the anger spreading through him, "just swing with the Blues." He rose from the stool. "I'll ram my fist up Benny's nose." He started for the control booth.

"Oh, Man," Charlie wailed, "don't blow it!"

Shelley riffed and began the beat. Once again they began to play the untitled Blues. Pete came in from the top and Charlie joined him.

"Let's hear it, Jess," Red said. "Just relax and enjoy, y'know."

Jess added her voice.

Ghost opened the control booth door and entered. The

engineer hovered over the controls, one hand on the gain, his eye on the needle bouncing back and forth in the dial before him. Frielobe sat in a chair and Benny leaned over him. Benny turned.

"You wait outside, Ghost," Benny said.

"No, let him come in," Frielobe said. "Come in, kid. I don't like to play the heavy. Come on. Let's understand. Benny's brought me talent before. Some I use, some I don't. But that's up to me."

"You're the boss, Milt," Benny said. "Whatever you say goes."

"Now wait a minute, Benny," Ghost said. "You said he's to listen to our stuff, not tell us how to do it."

"In this company, what I say goes."

"He's an idealist, Milt."

"Look, kid," Frielobe said, "don't think I'm not sympathetic to you guys. I used to work in a band myself."

"And you were very good," Benny said.

"Good schmood. I had to struggle until I wised up. Now I don't like commerce, but that's the world we live in. Blame the public, don't blame the poor recording engineer."

Frielobe turned to the engineer, as though to emphasize his point. "Bring the level up a bit, George."

The engineer turned the dial and the sound of the group in the studio came out over the loudspeaker. Ghost listened, then turned to the window to watch. Jess was smiling and swinging. Her voice was a compliment to the two horns, and they wailed the Blues. They were all smiling and it was evident that they were enjoying the session. Frielobe had motioned to Benny for quiet, and he was listening. Benny heard nothing. He was sweating, angling a way to save the deal. He started to say something.

"Shhh—" Frielobe said, waggling his hand. He listened, then said, "That's not bad." He looked at Ghost. "Who's number is that?"

"I wrote it," Ghost said.

"The same number you heard before and didn't like," Benny said.

Frielobe ignored him. "The girl's good," he said. "I think I like it." He turned to the engineer. "What do you think, George?"

"It's a lousy room," the engineer said.

"Let's hear it with a piano," Frielobe said. He was all usiness now.

"Well—" Ghost said, pausing, but giving ground, "okay. ut we want to play it all the way through. No stops."

"Sure, kid."

Ghost left the control and crossed to the piano.

"What happened?" Jess asked.

"He likes it," Ghost said. He winked at her and she miled. "Okay," he said, "let's go, and let's swing."

"I'm with you, Man," Charlie said. He brought the tenor o his lips.

Ghost started it off and with Red and Shelley he built a hythm foundation that was strong and moving. Charlie t ride on the tenor and Pete came in. Jess waited several ars, and when she felt the horns she came in, blending her oice. Ghost closed his eyes and listened. It was good. He ad not written it with a vocal in mind, but Jess' voice was ke a sixth instrument in the group. She was answering the enor, then the trumpet, sometimes riding over them. They ave her a solo and she was caught up in the wailing blues nd her voice registered the pathos that Ghost had poured nto the piece many months before. He opened his eyes to ook at her, and she was gone. Pete picked her up on a high ote and rode down beside her, handing it to Charlie. They ad never sounded better, and none of them could have ex- lained why, but they all knew that they had hit something, me peak, some unknown explainable register when they new that they were good, that anyone listening would now that they were good. Ghost silently prayed that the ngineer was making a take. They rode to a climax and nded with Jess, her voice fading, fading to a husky whisper, nen out. Charlie put the period on with a wild discordant ail. Ghost lifted his hands and signalled the control booth.

"That's it."

"Wow! I mean, wow!" Charlie threw his arms about Jess nd swung her into the air. "You were great!"

"The Princess of it all," Ghost said, beaming.

"That was weird," Shelley said.

They leaned back in their chairs and grinned, still unable get over the sensation of really swinging.

"It's a lovely number, Ghost."

"Only the way you sing it," he said.

"Hah," Charlie said, "get the Ghost. He's going modest on us. Take the bows, Man, that's a swinging piece."

"It's sure got it, all right," Pete said. "I been around more than most, and that's as good as anything Leadbelly ever did."

"Boy," Milt Frielobe shouted, coming from the control booth. "Boys, that was wonderful." He slammed Ghost on the back. "Never heard anything like it, kid, never. Sell a million." He turned to Jess. "Sweetheart, I like your style. That no-singing singing. Just great." He turned back to Ghost. "Wakefield, I think you got a hit."

"Thank you," Ghost said.

"We can use one," Charlie said.

"Well, Benny," Frielobe said, still beaming, "let's talk business. Does the Ghost come along, or do you want this to be a solo operation?"

"Benny can handle it," Ghost said.

"He trusts you," Frielobe chortled, bursting into laughter.

Ghost grimaced and was about to say something, but Benny stepped in. "Where you going to be later?"

"Around and about," Ghost said. "Give us a call at the Greek's. Or at home. We'll be around somewhere."

"Great, men," Frielobe said. "Thanks for the job."

"Thanks, Mr. Frielobe," Shelley said.

"Okay, Mr. Frielobe," Pete said.

"How's the missus?" Red asked.

Frielobe looked at him questioningly, then he remembered. "Oh," he said, "yes, now I know you. I thought I'd seen you before. So, this is the group that plays for charity. Well, well, that makes it even nicer. But you won't be playing for charity long boys, I can tell you that. You've got it."

Benny steered Frielobe away. He could see the distaste growing on Ghost's face, and he didn't want anything to happen to his deal.

"Where you know him from, Red?"

"Baby's party," Red said.

"A complete fink," Ghost said.

"Ah, c'mon, Ghost, whatta ya care? We cut a great side "That's what's important."

"It just gripes me that's all. You pour your life into music, and it's bastards like that who control the whol

ammed thing, who say whether or not the people are going
o be allowed to listen."
"The thing is, we did it. That's all that matters. We did it
lean and honest and we cut a side that is us, and only us."
"I know you're right," Ghost said. "But I still don't like
hat kind of guy."
"I think it went beautifully," Jess said, "Don't you."
"Pretty good, yeah," Ghost said.
"Went smooth," Charlie said to Jess.
"You have a great voice, Princess."
"We should be able to get a few decent jobs out of this,"
Charlie said. "You're a genius, Ghost."
"No genius. We just got to hold out for what we want."
"Man," Pete said, "I thought this would be a bad day."
They had their instruments packed, and they moved out
f the studio and stood in a loose knot on the sidewalk. Shel-
y was loading his drums in Pete's car.
"You want to come up to my place and celebrate?" Jess
sked.
"Well," Pete said, hesitating, "we sort of promised Nick
he Greek if we cut a record we'd have a splash over there."
"Sure," Jess agreed.
"We could do both," Ghost said.
"No, no," Jess said. "That's all right."
"You kill me, you know that? You kill me."
"But, Ghost, I've never been to Nick's. I'd love to see it,
d love to meet Nick."
"Well, let's go," Pete said. "Squeeze into the car."
"We'll take a cab," Ghost said.
"C'mon, what's the matter? We're all friends. We'll pile in
ere together."
"Well—"
"I'd love it," Jess said.
"Okay."
They stopped before Nick's Pool Hall and piled out of
e car, opened the door and surged into the place. The
oom was drab in the light of day, but it was Nick's and
ey were happy.
One pool table was in use. The light was garish on the
reen felt. The man stroking for a shot pulled back and
owled at the sudden explosion of noise. He hesitated, look-

ing up at the group. He was bull-shouldered and dark. His partner, leaning on his cue, turned his head. He had a thin face, sharp rat-like features. His lips were as thin as the toothpick that dangled from his mouth, his face expressionless. He turned back to the game. The big man remade his bridge, stroked and made his shot.

"Nick," Ghost shouted, "we made it!"

"Nick, I'll buy you a new tie," Red said.

"We got money, Man, bread for our Greek Daddy."

"Close up shop," Ghost shouted, "it's celebration time."

Nick had been sweeping in the rear of the place. The sudden invasion had startled him, but he greeted the group with a warm smile. The smile left his face. "Whatta you mean, close up shop? I got customers."

"Princess," Ghost said, leading Jess forward, "I want you to meet the Greek."

Nick fumbled with the broom, then placed it against a table. He wiped his hands on his apron. "Nick Bubalinos," he said, extending his hand. "Please excuse the rough language. What is your name?"

Jess shook the extended hand and was bathed in the warmth of the little man's smile. "Jess," she answered. "Jess," Princess Polanski."

"Fine. Good name. Long, like mine."

"What about a game of cards?" Shelley said. "Losers weepers."

"Who's gonna play?" Pete asked. Ghost, Shelley, Greek, Red, Charlie—what about Jess?"

"I'll stay out," Jess said.

"Do you mind?" Shelley asked. "Just for about an hour, honey?"

"I don't mind."

"Just an hour. We're gonna celebrate all night."

"What's the occasion?" Nick asked.

"We made it, Man, we cut a record and it was great. We never played better."

"You mean you're finally making money?"

"Ha-ha, get a load of this man. Greek, we're all gonna be rich!"

"In that case we play poker—for money."

Laughing, they pulled chairs around a table and sat down. Nick brought the cards. Charlie was still standing.

"Charlie," Nick said, "why don't you dance with the little lady?" He said to Jess: "Charlie a great dancer."

"Hey, c'mon," Ghost shouted, "it's a plot to make me lose my girl."

"Nick," Red said, "we need some wine."

Nick went to the rear and returned with a bottle of red wine and glasses. He put it all on the table. Red uncorked the bottle and poured. Charlie went with Jess to the juke box and they surveyed the selections. Nick went to the counter and returned with the chips. Ghost was cutting and shuffling the deck.

"Hey," Ghost called, catching the eye of the pool players. "You guys are welcome to the party."

"Thanks," the big man said, his voice a rasping rumble, "but we'll finish this game first."

"Sky's the limit," Ghost said. "Make yourselves at home. The wine is on the table."

"Wine I could use," the big man said. "Hey, Skip," he said to his friend, "pour me a glass, will ya'?"

"Sure, Tommy." The little guy came to the table. He reached for two glasses, his movements naturally furtive, as though he was used to being abused. He took the wine bottle and poured the glasses full.

The juke box whirred, then suddenly blared loud, the strains of the cha-cha filling the room. Charlie and Jess began to dance.

"Okay, low card deals. Red? Too bad. Shelley? Here you go. Nick?"

Shelley cut the three of clubs and Ghost passed him the deck.

"Name it," Nick said.

Shelley shuffled the cards carefully. "How about a little seven-card?"

"Run e'm," Ghost said.

"A nickel to get the cards, gentlemen," Shelley said. He tossed a coin to the center of the table and began to d al the cards, the first two face down to each player. Slowly and precisely, he snapped a single up card before each of the others. "Bet that ten, Red, 'cause they don't come no higher."

"Ten bets a nickel," Red said.

The others tossed coins in the pot and waited for Shelley to deal the next card.

Red caught another ten and Ghost emitted an appreciative whistle.

"Power," he said. "Bet 'em, Red."

Red leaned back and stole a glance at his two hole cards. "Tens bet a dime," he said, flipping a coin in the pot.

"Let's play for twenty," Nick said, smiling.

"That's what I like to see. A believer," Shelley said, contributing two dimes to the pile of coins on the table. The others equalled the bet and Shelley dealt the third card.

Red caught a third ten and the others groaned.

"Man, Shelley, you got a lead arm," Ghost said with disgust. He turned his cards over and stood up. They all folded and Red gathered in the pot.

Ghost walked over to where Jess was dancing and tapped Charlie on the shoulder. "Join the game, Charlie," he said. "Use my chips."

Charlie turned Jess loose. "Thanks," he said, "you dance real good."

"Thank you, sir," Jess said. She moved into Ghost's arms and they danced slowly. "You the jealous type?" she asked.

"Of every minute you've been around without me."

"Ah, pretty words. Do you live this way all the time?"

"What way do you mean?"

"Oh, I mean, just sort of digging everything. With friends who like you and understand you. Having fun, enjoying little things like laughter."

"All the time," Ghost said. "Every day."

"You have a wonderful life."

"It's your life now, Princess. There are stars all around. Just reach up and grab one out of our sky."

"I'm reaching," she whispered.

They held each other tightly and moved with the music, making small circles before the juke box.

The front door opened and Benny entered. He clapped his hands for attention. Advancing into the room, he shouted, "Now hear this, the world's greatest agent is about to speak!" He passed the pool tables, came to the rear and stood over the card game. "Hey, where's *my* wine?" He reached for a glass and the bottle. While he was pouring, he said, "Nobody drops the big bomb but Benny."

He put the bottle down. "Hey, Ghost," he called, "listen to this." Ghost and Jess kept dancing, but they were watching and listening. "I just conned Frielobe into cutting four sides," Benny said, beaming, enjoying the startled looks on all the faces. "Possibly an album," he added. "If he digs those way-out blues you guys can play anything you want."

"You're kidding," Ghost said. He stopped dancing. He held Jess' arm and they crossed to the table. The others were on their feet.

"When?" Charlie asked.

"You have a session tomorrow at four."

"Wow!"

"Man, here we go! Baby Jackson stand back! Oscar Peterson stand back! Milt Jackson stand back! Here we go, go, go!"

"It's like a dream," Jess said, clutching at Ghost's arm.

"What's the charge?" Charlie asked.

"You get scale. Ghost gets scale. But it's a start. After this I'll get you club dates. You're riding with Benny now, boys, so you better get used to working."

"Okay," Nick said. He was still sitting and holding his cards. "So you got work. That's good. But now we're playing cards." He scowled, shaking his head with exaggerated disgust. "Artists, I appreciate, but when they ain't arting. I like people, not all the phony baloney that goes with artists. I am great. I am this, I am that. I am about to win the card game, so they all go crazy."

"Nick, Man, you don't understand."

"I understand I got cards that can't be beat. So sit down."

Chairs scraped. The players sat down. The game was resumed.

"Ghost," Benny said, "I gotta have a word with you."

"Sure. Go ahead."

"I mean alone." He glanced at Jess. "Sorry, I don't mean to be blunt."

"I don't mind," Jess said. She moved away and stood behind Charlie's chair, watching the game. Benny moved away and Ghost followed him.

"What's up?" Ghost asked.

"That Untitled Blues," Benny said. "I know how much it meant to you."

"You kidding?"

"Look, I know. Don't give me any jazz. I wasn't always an agent, remember. I was playing when you wrote that number. We were both working that strip joint in San Diego. That was forever ago."

"Six years, and I remember. So what? It's a number. I like it, but so what?"

"Who you kidding? I remember the sweat you poured into that piece. That's a hunk of your soul, Man."

"Okay, so what are you driving at?"

"We're not getting much money for it on this deal. It's a great number, and you know it. We could cancel today's cutting, and save that number. Six months from now we could sell it for real bread."

"But Jess sings it great. That song could make her."

"Look, I'm an agent. My business is to buy and sell. You want to trade in six years for a girl, that's your business."

"What's the angle, Benny? Why you putting Jess down? Is it because I took her out of that party?"

"I'm not putting anybody down. It's just that—"

"I'm going to marry her."

"That's your business." He turned and walked back to the table. Ghost stood where he was a moment. Red had left the game and was now dancing with Jess.

Shelley said: "I mean, is this going to go on, or are we going to play cards?"

"Play cards," Nick said. "Pot limit. Nothing wild, no five-card stud, just seven and closed." He palmed the cards and started the deal.

Ghost was irritated with Benny. He understood that he was angry about losing Jess, but what the hell, this wasn't just another make-out session, he was in love with Jess, and Benny ought to know it. He thought about Benny and Jess together and the mental picture annoyed him even more. He turned away from the group and watched the two guys at the pool table. The big one was good. He cushioned a nice shot that dropped the five ball.

"Look at Red," Pete chortled, "he's really something."

"He's something, all right."

"Hey, Benny," Nick said, "pour the wine. Don't be stingy."

Ghost turned and watched Jess dancing with Red. He

marveled at the beauty of her, the sensuous grace. Benny and Jess. Jess and-----. No, dammit, it doesn't matter.

The little guy left the pool table and crossed to the card game. "I get a little more wine?"

"Sure. Here, help yourself."

The big dark man was standing by the table, waiting for the wine. He watched Jess. His eyes were narrowed. The little man brought the glass of wine and the big man drank it down in a gulp, his eyes never leaving the undulating figure of the girl. Ghost watched him. He didn't like what he saw. Two weeks ago it might have been Jess and— No, dammit, get off that! Jess did a turn, her laughter ringing in the room, then came back to Red. The others were watching her.

"Ante up," Nick said. "Come on, stop watching the girls."

Ghost moved over the card game, but he stood away from Benny.

"Hey, Nick," Charlie said, "don't forget you're going to sing for us."

"I need a girl to sing to," Nick said.

"Won't I do, Mr. Polapolis?" Jess asked.

"She knows my name," Nick said, grinning. "All right,, honey, I sing to you. Has class, that girl. No offense, Ghost."

"Come on, play cards," Shelley said.

"Where that Ghost get a girl like that, huh, where he get a girl like that?"

"He lives right."

"Who bets?"

"I pass."

The music ended, and Red came back to the game. Benny went to Jess. "I'm next, sweetheart." Another record began and they danced.

Ghost watched closely. He could hear nothing of what Benny was saying, but he could tell by Jess' expression that he was giving her a hard time. Before the dance ended, Jess moved away from Benny and started back to the table.

"Ghost," Charlie said, "sit in for me." He came out of his chair. "You don't mind, do you, old buddy?"

Ghost grinned. He shook his head and slid into Charlie's chair. How could you be mad with a bunch like this. He watched Charlie intercept Jess and lead her back to finish

the dance. He was talking and laughing and Jess regained her smile.

Examining his cards, Ghost passed, letting the others carry the game. He watched Benny move over to the pool table. This, he didn't like. Benny was looking for trouble. He watched Benny get into conversation with the big man, saw the big man glance over at the card game and scowl, then saw Benny jerk his thumb in Jess' direction, and the big man's brooding eyes follow.

The others had dropped out, and it was only Ghost and Nick sticking. "So what do you do?" Ghost asked.

"I raise."

"I see."

"Ghost, what you got, off the record?"

"Off the record—I'm not going to tell you."

"I make you a little side bet."

"It's only you and me in the game."

"That's okay. I make you a side bet. The loser drinks a glass of Retsina wine. What you got?"

"Three kings."

"Three jacks. Agh!" Nick threw down his cards. He lifted the full glass of wine and drained the glass. He coughed, wiped his mouth with his sleeve. "You try it, Ghost."

"I don't want any of that Greek slop."

"What are you, a killjoy? Have some Retsina wine! Come on, it puts hair on the chest."

"Okay," Ghost said. "Anything to keep you quiet." He lifted his glass and drank it.

Nick had been drinking steadily and he was already getting drunk. His voice was loud. "Greeks can drink anyone under the table." He held his glass high, then emptied it.

The two at the pool table had stopped their game, and were watching the card table. "Hell, Tommy," the little man said, "nobody can drink *you* under the table."

"You're damned right!" The big man crossed the room to the card table. He put his glass down. "Fill it up," he said.

"You gonna take me on, Mister?"

"That's right, I take you on. One Irishman can drink any ten Greeks under. And I got ten bucks on me to prove it."

"He's had two full glasses already," Pete said.

"Okay." The big man downed one glass. He poured it full,

swallowed it again. He pounded the glass down on the table. "My name is Tommy Sheehan."

"Great," Nick said. His speech was slurred. "Here we go, Irish." He drank another full glass. The big man drank his. "Pete," Nick said, "you fill 'em." Pete filled the two glasses. "Okay," Nick said, raising his glass, "Now, let's see if this is enough for you, or if you can stand up with me . . . potato."

Sheehan's broad face creased in a grin, showing an expanse of stained teeth. "Okay, olive oil, we'll see."

They drained their glasses. Pete filled them again. They drank again. "Pour them out," Nick said. Pete filled them. Their eyes locked, both men emptied the glasses in a single gulp. They had both been drinking prior to the bout, and now they were getting seriously drunk. "Any cheese?" Nick asked.

"No cheese," Sheehan growled. "This is straight, little man."

"Okay, straight. Again, Benny . . . uh . . . I mean, Pete. Pour it out."

The glasses were filled again. Except for the juke box, the room was silent. Charlie and Jess were still dancing, but they watched the contest. Both men emptied the glasses.

"All right," Ghost said, "that's enough."

"You had enough?" Nick asked.

The big man lurched on his feet. "You're all right, little man," he said.

"Too fast go down."

Ghost felt relief. The drinking contest could have ended in something ugly. The group relaxed. Charlie and Jess went back to dancing. The big man had his arm over Nick's shoulder. He stood erect.

"You're my buddy, little Greek."

"You okay, Irish."

"Hey," the big man said, lurching away from Nick. "I want you to meet a pal. Come here, kid." He grabbed the little man roughly and dragged him to the table. "This is Skipper. Wonderful guy, Skipper. He hates musicians."

"He's in the wrong crowd," Ghost said.

Sheehan drew himself up. He leered across the table at Ghost. "I hate musicians, too," he said.

Ghost stared up at the big man. He felt his legs begin to

tremble as they always did at times like this. He was on the edge of violence. He felt empty inside and slightly nauseous. He did not answer, but he forced himself to meet the man's eyes.

"Everybody hates musicians," Nick said. "Dope fiends."

"What's the matter," Ghost asked, his eyes on the big man, "you don't sing in the shower."

"Sure," Sheehan said.

"Then you're a musician, too."

"But I ain't no dope fiend," Sheehan said, still spoiling for trouble, "and I ain't no spade."

"Easy."

"Hey," Nick said, turning in his chair, "I take care of this guy. You sing a duet with the Greek."

"Ha-ha-ha." Sheehan threw his huge arms around Nick. "Okay. That's swell. You know, you ain't a bad little guy—for a little guy."

"Yeah . . . yeah," Nick said, wincing under the pressure of the powerful arms. He began to sing a Greek song. The big man reared back and laughed. Nick got to his feet. He staggered, but regained his footing, and moved around the table singing. His voice was an almost-tenor and badly off-key, but he didn't seem to notice and he put a lot of zest into the song, gesturing with his arms, his expression serious.

The juke box was still playing and Charlie still danced with Jess, oblivious to the tension around the table.

Nick ended his song and the boys applauded. Sheehan pounded on the table for silence. "Now, I'll sing an Irish song," he said. "When Irish Eyes Are Smiling."

Ghost laughed. Sheehan stiffened and glared at him. A muscle twitched in the big man's face and he knotted his hands. His teeth were clenched when he spoke. "What so funny?"

"The Irish eyes aren't smiling," Ghost said.

"You a wise guy or something?"

"Not me," Ghost said.

"You're asking for trouble."

"Wrong guy," Ghost said. He knew now that Sheehan was stupid, besides being drunk, and he knew that he could talk the man out of a fight.

"Oh yeah?"

"Why don't you sing?"

"Maybe I don't want to sing."

"Suit yourself, but I thought that you said you were going to sing."

"The hell with it!"

"Suit yourself. It's a free country."

"That's right. A free country. And that makes me just as good as any two-bit musician."

"Maybe better."

"Damn right, better!" Sheehan was working himself into a frenzy. He glowered at Ghost with open hatred. "You think I ain't better?"

"C'mon, c'mon," Nick said, beginning to sober. "Hey, Irish, how about the song?"

"I ain't singing no goddamned song!"

"What happened to our card game?" Pete asked in an effort to end the tension.

"Yeah, let's play," Red said. He grabbed up the cards and began to shuffle them. "Who's in?"

"I'm too drunk," Nick said.

Ghost glanced at Benny, who was now standing away from the group and watching. The fat man had a satisfied smile on his face. Whatever was happening, Ghost knew that Benny had a hand in it. In some twisted way, he was avenging Jess. Ghost turned his gaze upon Jess and Charlie.

Jess laughed suddenly and Sheehan whirled away from the table. He weaved uneasily on his feet, pitched slightly forward on the balls of his feet. His huge arms hung at his sides. A lop-sided grin spread over his face.

"Hey," Sheehan said, "that girl is great."

Ghost caught his breath and tensed. His hands were shaking. Get a hold on yourself, he cried out within, you're not afraid of this big bastard. Stay cool. Stay cool. He could feel the sweat start in his armpits.

"That girl's with everybody," Sheehan said. "Everybody but me."

"She happens to be with me," Ghost said.

Sheehan turned slowly. The grin was gone and his face was ugly. "Then what's she doing dancing with *him?*"

"He happens to be my friend."

Sheehan narrowed his eyes. "Am I your friend?"

"We just bumped into each other. I don't know you." Ghost was stalling. He knew that he had to be careful to

say the right thing. There was no doubt of what the big man had on his mind. The sweat was running along his sides, and the palms of his hands were damp and cold. Tentacles of fear spread through his guts.

The record had stopped playing; the room was tense and silent. Ghost sat back in his chair and gripped the edge of the table with both hands. Red held the cards. Pete watched. Benny smiled. Nick stood against the wall with a guitar in his hands, waiting. Jess and Charlie stood together near the juke box. The big man was crouched, glaring at Ghost.

"I'm good enough to drink with," Sheehan said. "That makes me your friend."

Nick pushed away from the wall. "Hey, Tommy," he shouted, strumming the guitar, "what happened to our singing."

"You heard me. I'm your friend."

Ghost did not answer. The fear clawed at him. He wanted to speak, but the fear had his voice. His knuckles were white on the table. The juke box suddenly blared again, a loud fast number.

Sheehan turned back to look at Jess. The smile returned, a twisted, drunken smile. His arms came up and he began to move towards Jess.

"Hold it, big man!" Ghost came to his feet, toppling the chair.

"Hello, Baby, you wanna dance with a real man?" He continued to advance slowly.

"Hold it, you sonofabitch!" Ghost screamed. He stood by the table, his face twisted with fury. But he did not move.

"C'mon, Baby, I'll show you what a real man is really like." He laughed.

Jess was holding her breath, the fright showing in her eyes. She took a step backwards.

"Hey," Charlie shouted, "get him out of here!"

There was a sudden scuffle of chairs. Everyone was standing. Nick ran to the big man and grabbed his arm. "All right, fella," Nick said.

"Aghh!" The big man jerked his arm, lifting Nick off the floor. He bellowed with rage, and his face was contorted. He whirled. Nick staggered back. The two ham-like hands

came up. He descended on Nick, grabbing him by the clothing, bunching the fabric in his fists. With a grunt he swung Nick into the air and held him over his head.

"Put him down!"

"He's nuts!"

"My God, he'll kill him."

"Aghh!" Sheehan shouted. He took one step and threw Nick across a pool table. Nick's scream was a high, piercing wail of terror. The small body cartwheeled, arms and legs flailing. He hit the green felt and rolled. His head struck the mahogany of the cushion with a sickening thud. The scream was cut off as though a switch had been thrown. Jess buried her face in her hands. Nick did a slow roll and hit the floor. He did not move.

"Get the bastard!"

"Ha-ha-ha! Come on! Come on!"

Pete crouched to rush the big man. The little rat-faced guy, Skipper, rushed from a corner behind them. He was swinging a bottle as he came. He decked Pete. He tried to get to Sheehan's side, but Red brought him down with a tackle. Shelley gave a rebel yell and went swinging in. The big man side-stepped. He stopped Shelley in mid-stride with a left hook in the stomach. Shelley seemed to hang on the implanted fist. He gasped. A look of sudden shock appeared on his face; his eyes rolled. The big man clubbed him across the side of the neck, and Shelley went down to stay. Red had the little man against the wall and was banging his head into the plaster.

"Jess, get out of here!" Charlie shouted.

"You!" Sheehan shouted, leveling his finger at Ghost. "You're the one I want! Come here! Come to me!" Ghost had not moved from the table. He stood as though rooted to the floor. The muscles of his neck were knotted. His teeth were clenched, and his eyes were wide, staring.

Charlie had a chair in his hands. He ran four steps, the chair coming over his head. He brought it down across the big man's shoulders. Sheehan grunted and staggered, his knees beginning to buckle. But he was still on his feet. He whirled on Charlie, swinging his right as he turned. It was a Sunday punch and Charlie ducked it, but he was off-balance, and Sheehan tagged him with a fast left. Charlie tried to counter, but the big man drove the left in again. Charlie

went back. He hit the pool table and seemed to bounce back into the right that took him off his feet and drove him across the top of the pool table.

Jess screamed and huddled against the juke box. Ghost heard her, but he could not move. He closed his eyes.

"You!" Sheehan shouted. "Big man! You're the one I want. The jazz man. The Romeo." He lumbered forward. "You, with your pocket full of needles. Big man with the girls."

Ghost kept his eyes tightly closed. He could feel that Sheehan was standing before him. He recoiled and lifted his hands with the palms out, as though he could push the man away. He heard Jess scream again. He could taste the bitter bile of nausea.

"Come on, musician! You're the one I want."

White light flashed across the darkness of his closed eyes. The snarling, taunting voice beat against his brain, and memory spread across his iris: a memory that froze him in the face of violence, the memory that had been packed away with childhood. He saw it all again, heard that flat cold voice again. *He was sitting on the floor rubbing saddle soap into a baseball glove to soften the leather. A bat, a Louisville Slugger, rested at his feet. It was night. The radio was offering music. His mother was in the kitchen washing the dinner dishes, and his father sat in his chair reading the newspaper. The door burst open and the three men came into the room. He was startled by their sudden appearance, frightened as only a 12-year-old can be. He had never seen the men before. His father dropped the newspaper and looked at the men. "What?" his father exclaimed. He knew that his father would throw them out. His father was afraid of nothing. The men advanced into the room, one of them smiling; the one who spoke. "Hello, George," the man said. "I thought you'd be expecting us." He smiled. "Now wait a minute," his father said, starting to back away. "Too late, George." The men came closer. He saw his father cringe. The men were on him, beating him. His father cried out. His mother appeared in the doorway and screamed. "This'll teach ya!" the man said. They continued to beat his father. His hand found the baseball bat, but he could not lift it, could not move. He watched them beat up his father, heard the man say, "You'll never welch on a bet again." And when*

they were gone and his father lay in a spreading pool of blood, he vomited. And when his father staggered to his feet and looked down at the baseball bat clutched in his hand and glared hatred at him, he had turned to his mother and screamed, "Mama! Mama!"

Ghost realized that he was shouting. "Mama!"

"Listen to him!" Sheehan bellowed, his laughter boring into Ghost's tortured, guilt-ridden mind. "Listen to the big shot musician. He wants his mama!" He guffawed. "This is what you're gonna get!"

Ghost had swallowed his voice. He was overcome with shame. Sheehan grabbed him by the coat and jerked him. He felt the sharp sting of Sheehan's hand on his face.

"Stop it!" Jess screamed. She ran across the room and threw herself upon Sheehan. The big man laughed.

"She's got more guts than you got, jazz man." He swung his arm and knocked Jess to the floor. "Lay there where you belong. Jess whimpered.

"Now you get it," Sheehan said, slapping Ghost again. He held him with one hand and cuffed him with the other. Ghost's head wobbled. He ached. The pain was sharp. But he could not lift his hands from his sides. Sheehan hit Ghost hard with his fist and let him drop to the floor. Ghost landed in a sitting position. His eyes strayed to Jess. She was looking at him. He felt the shame overwhelm him, but he could not get up.

"C'mon, you yellow bum, get up!"

Charlie was on his feet. He came up to Sheehan from behind and rabbit-punched him on the back of the neck with both hands. Sheehan grunted and staggered. Pete was on his feet, and he came for Sheehan with a chair. Red was up, but too dazed to do anything. Sheehan roared with fury and turned to face Charlie. "I'll kill ya!" Charlie drove a knee into the big man's groin. Sheehan screwed up his face and gagged. He doubled over. Pete hit him a glancing blow with the chair, but he still did not go down. Charlie drove a hard left into his stomach, then a right to the jaw. Sheehan staggered back, pain and confusion in his face. He lifted his hands, but the fight was gone. He could not dodge Charlie's fists. He backed against the wall. Charlie chopped him across the throat, then stepped back. Sheehan weaved.

"Now, you bastard!" Charlie snarled. He brought his

right from the floor. It hit Sheehan's jaw with the resounding crunch of bone-against-bone. Sheehan's eyes glazed, his arms dropped. He stiffened and went down like a tree. He crashed to the floor, rolled and did not move.

Charlie stood, his hands hanging, his chest and shoulders heaving as he regained his breath. Pete had him by the arm.

"You okay?" Pete asked. Charlie smiled and nodded. Nick was up and staggering around, one hand pressed to the back of his head. Skipper was crawling for the door. Shelley was on the floor, but he was conscious, and he kept saying over and over again, "Get the license number." Red went to Nick and took his arm. "You better sit down," Red said.

Ghost sat with his face buried in his hands.

"Ohhhh," Nick groaned, "what a hangover."

"You better sit down."

"Must have been a hit and run," Shelley said, still staring at the ceiling.

Charlie and Pete were standing over Ghost, looking down at him. Ghost felt their presence, but he knew that he could never lift his face and meet their eyes. They would have to hate him. He could never explain about the old fear. He had never explained it to anyone.

Nick and Red joined Charlie and Pete. "Ghost," Nick said, forgetting his own pain for the moment. "Ghost, c'mon, boy. You okay?"

They could never understand. Ghost did not answer. His shame covered him. He hated himself. He hated these people for seeing him like this.

"Hey, Ghost, what's wrong?"

Go away, his mind screamed. Just go away and leave me alone.

Jess was on her knees before him. Her voice was soft, tentative. "Ghost—"

He huddled on the floor. Oh, damn them, why do they have to rub it in. I'm a coward! Okay, so I'm a coward. So get away from me.

Jess lifted her hand and placed it on his arm. "Ghost—" she said.

His head jerked up. The eyes were red-rimmed and filled with torment. His face was twisted with anger. He knocked her hand away. "Lemme alone!" he screamed. "Get away

from me, damn you! Why don't you mind your own business and stay out of my way. I don't need a mother!"

Jess recoiled, catching her breath. The viciousness of the attack stunned her. She backed away. Her eyes seemed to cloud over. It was as though someone had died. She bit her lip. She started to say something, then stopped. She got to her feet. She walked away and stood alone, her arms folded across her breast.

Ghost lowered his head. Charlie looked down at him, still surprised by the outburst, then he turned and went to Jess.

"You're trembling," Charlie said.

"I want to go home," Jess said. Her voice was flat, the voice of the recent dead, a hopeless monotone.

Charlie went back to Ghost. He dropped down and said, "You hurt the girl's feelings, Man. She wants to go home."

"Fine," Ghost snapped. "She asked you. You take her!"

Charlie stood. He looked down at Ghost with a mixture of anger and distaste. He looked at Pete, who shrugged. Red shook his head sadly. Charlie's expression softened. "You sure, Ghost?"

"Sure I'm sure. For crissakes, leave me alone!"

"Look, Man, that could happen to anyone."

"But it didn't! It happened to me! So get away from me. And take her!"

Charlie turned to Pete. "Give him a cigarette, huh?" He patted Ghost on the shoulder. "Play it cool, Man."

"Screw!"

Charlie tensed in anger, but he cooled it. He turned and went to Jess. "Ready?"

They started for the door. Ghost lifted his head and watched them leave. Charlie held Jess' arm. There it goes, Ghost thought, there it goes. The whole goddamned world. I had it and I ran it into the mud.

Benny leaned down and lit Ghost's cigarette. He smiled at Ghost. "I know just how you feel," he said.

CHAPTER EIGHT

PETE DRIFTED off. Nick was in the back room holding ice to his head. Red and Shelley hung around for awhile, hoping that Ghost would come out of it, but they finally left.

Ghost did not move until he was alone, then he got up from the floor and walked out.

It was getting dark. The lights were on. He walked, completely enclosed in himself.

He had been humiliated. He had been afraid, there was no denying that. But he had also been wrong, and he knew that. If only they had left him alone. If only the big guy had not started after Jess. If only they hadn't drunk so much? If—If—If. He knew damned well that Jess was only trying to be nice. She was concerned, and he had turned on her.

He walked for an hour. The fight scene began to fade. The importance of the moment was dissolving in the welter of rationalizations he offered to himself, and the plans for

atonement, and the strategy needed to make it up with Jess. He would explain and she would understand. He would tell her about the old man, and the time they beat him for holding out on a small-time bet, and the terror that always clutched him in a fight, when he thought of how they had broken the old man for life. She would understand everything, and it would be all right. He could patch it up with the boys tomorrow. Everything would be all right, just like before.

Hailing a cab, he settled in the back and lit a cigarette. He was nervous and the drive seemed to take forever. He thought about what he would say. It had to be right. It *had* to be. He butted the cigarette and lit another. He crossed his legs, uncrossed them, crossed them again. He wanted to ask the driver to hurry, but knew that it wouldn't do any good. He stared through the window. He recognized the Westwood section, and doubts assailed him. Would it work? Would Jess really forgive him? She had to. She damned well had to!

The cab stopped. Ghost paid the driver and got out. He looked up and saw the light in Jess' apartment. He did not pause at the pool, but went up the steps, along the balcony, and knocked.

Jess opened the door. She registered surprise. Ghost smiled. "Hi," he said.

She regarded him coldly. "What do you want?"

"I want to talk to you."

"Call me tomorrow."

"Jess, look—" He pushed past her and entered the apartment. She did not close the door. He walked to the center of the room. Jess stayed by the door. Ghost turned. He rubbed his chin and smiled sheepishly.

"What a night," he said. "Can you imagine a guy like that? I mean, a guy that size going nuts like that."

Jess did not answer. Her expression was cold, and there were hard lines drawing at the corners of her mouth. She lifted a hand and pulled the dressing gown closed over her breasts. Her other hand was still on the door knob.

"I mean—it was so stupid."

"Yes, it was."

It wasn't going right. He wasn't getting through to her.

He had to make it right, but he couldn't find the words to tell her. She was like a stranger and it frightened him. "Are you all right, Princess?"

There was the suggestion of a sneer in her voice. "Sure, I'm fine," she said. "Nobody hit me."

He bit his lip, then took a deep breath. He shifted on his feet and looked down at the carpet. He raised his eyes and gazed upon her. He was losing her. He felt the tears ready to well in his eyes and he fought against it. He stepped towards her. "Jess—"

"Don't touch me!"

He stopped. He bit down on his lip. He pleaded. "Jess, I'm just not a fighter."

"That's not what I was looking for," she said. "Now, will you please leave."

"Jess, I'm sorry, I'm really sorry."

"So am I. Please leave."

"Jess, let me explain."

"I heard enough back at Nick's," she snapped. Her eyes flashed, then clouded. "Look, mister, I bought a bill of goods from you. And I got put down good for it."

"Jess—"

"You listen for a change. I been put down all my life. I got put down because my old man had too many mouths to feed. I got put down because I was skinny and homely. I got put down because I was poor. And I got put down because I wanted to love somebody. That's when I was young. And when I got tired of it, I swore that nobody was going to put Jess Polanski down again; that nobody was going to get close enough." She paused, then went on in a lower voice. "I let you close. The first time. I was a sitting duck, and I got it. Well, mister, I don't give anybody a second try."

"Jess, you don't understand."

"I understand that I'm tired of listening to you. Will you please leave."

"Jess, I love you."

"Hurrah for you. Now, please go. I'm expecting company."

Ghost stared at her. His look was no longer pleading. Jealousy had churned in him. "Who?"

"That, friend, is none of your damned business."

"You didn't waste any time."

"You are so right, and I ain't gonna waste no time no more. The role of Angel doesn't suit me. From now on I play Jess Polanski."

He was angry. He had come to plead forgiveness and she was putting his face in the dirt. It no longer occurred to him that he had hurt her. The roles were now reversed. His eyes narrowed and he sneered at her. "Back to whoring," he said, wanting to hurt her.

"Get out!"

"A pleasure. I feel dirty."

"You'd better leave, hero. He's bigger than you are. He might hurt your feelings."

Ghost tensed. The anger throbbed in his head, and his hands were knotted into fists.

"It never meant anything to you, did it?"

"It meant I was a jerk," she said. She swung the door wide and stepped back. "See you around, buddy boy."

"Jess—"

"There's always the pool if you feel too bad," she said. "But don't leave any notes."

He glared at her. He held his ground a moment, then he crossed the room and walked through the door. She slammed it after him. He went along the balcony and down the steps. A figure swung in from the sidewalk. He recognized the whistling. He stepped back into the shadows. He watched Charlie go past him, Charlie with a bottle of whiskey in his arm, whistling Charlie about to make a score, good old Charlie; Charlie bastard! He watched Charlie climb the stairs, saw his shadow move along the balcony, heard the door open, saw the sudden shaft of light, heard the door close. Darkness.

So there you go. That's the way she swings. That's how the cookie crumbles. That's life. Crap! You walk alone, Man, you shuffle through this stinking life and you don't trust nobody. I mean, but nobody! He moved away from the building and walked to the edge of the pool. Charlie! The bitterness was a bad taste in his mouth. He spit on the concrete. Damn her! He looked up at the lighted window. The shade was drawn. He stood there waiting. It wasn't long. He remembered his first night up there. *I'll be ready for you in a mimute. I'll make you happy*. The light went out. Bitch!

He turned and walked to the street. He looked for a cab. Nothing. He turned to the right and walked. He cursed her, reviled her in his mind. At the first intersection he saw the light of a cruising cab. He brought his fingers to his lips and whistled. The cab pulled to the curb. He piled into the back seat. The cab pulled away from the curb.

"Where to, Buddy?"

"Downtown."

"Whereabouts?"

"Just keep driving. I'll tell you when."

"Any special section?"

"Just drive, Man, just drive."

The driver glanced up at the rear vision mirror, regarding him with suspicion. But he kept driving.

Ghost settled back. He lit a cigarette and watched the city of eternal night go by. They drove East on Wilshire Boulevard, passed through the Los Angeles Country Club, rolled through the giddy, gaudy town. They turned down La Cienega and then joined the automotive madness on Olympic Boulevard. Pedestrians watch out! Ghost rummaged in his pocket and brought out a handful of bills. He counted his money and put it back. Enjoy, enjoy! Gotta wash this rotten taste right outta my mouth, yes!

They got into the city part of the city; a city like any other city—the buildings and apartment houses like filing cabinets for human beings. The driver turned off the main drag and picked his way through the side streets. They were passing through the Negro section. They made a red light and stopped. Ghost stared across the intersection at a gaudy club that advertised jazz music.

"I'll get out here," he said. He paid the driver and got out. He crossed the street and entered the club.

The place was crowded. It was dimly lighted and smoke swirled against the low ceiling, eddied in the shaft of light that was centered on the singer. A circular bar was centered in the room. The combo played on a raised platform in the middle of the bar. The crowded room was predominantly Negro with a spattering of whites.

Ghost stood by the door digging it. He knew the scene. God, he had played enough of them. He saw it all as he had seen it many times when he was on the stand blowing. It al-

ways reminded him of a can of worms; a writhing mass of humanity. And the smells: the stale booze, the perfume, the sweat, and the permeating smell of fear. The fear of being alone with themselves. That's what brought them out to crowd up against the bar and cloud their brains with booze, and listen to the idiot talk, and make idiot talk. Better than anything, better than being alone. Man!

The singer was belting it. She was dark and the spotlight gave her a dusky look. Her face glistened with sweat. Her voice was harsh, and she sang from way down, a gut-bucket voice that wailed with the sounds of hunger. The combo was riding behind her, letting her take it and following along.

Keep a-knockin' but you can't come in,
I hear you knockin' but you can't come in,
I got an all-night trick agin,
So keep a knockin' but you can't come in.

And there was the jazz audience. The people, the great unwashed. The smilers, the hand-clappers, they were with her, digging it. Just a neighborhood crowd from Los Angeles. They lined the bar, they gathered in knots against the walls, they crowded into the small tables. The hipsters and hustlers and sweettalkers and fly cats and junkies and lushheads and strollers and high-jivers and pushers; there listening and digging and yes-yesing and knowing. And the deep, bawdy voice filled the room, rose above the noise, hollered.

Keep a-knockin' but you can't come in,
I'm busy grindin' so you can't come in,
If you love me you'll come back again,
Or come back tomorrow at half-past ten.

The blues, the ever-lovin', everlasting blues. And Ghost felt it. He had the world on his back. His manhood had been challenged and he had crawled down. He was hostile. He was wallowing in guilt and he wanted to drown it. He elbowed his way through the crowd and forced a spot for himself at the bar.

Leave me be your side track, poppa,
Till your main line comes,
Leave me be your side track, poppa,

Till your main line comes,
I can do better switchin'
Than your main line ever done.

Ghost hammered the bar with a half-dollar. The bartender, a gray-haired Negro, came along and stopped before him.

"Yessir."

"Double scotch," Ghost said. "On the rocks."

"Yessir." The bartender reached behind him for the bottle. He brought up a glass, poured the scotch over the two ice cubes.

Baby, see that spider climbin' on the wall,
Baby, see that spider climbin' on the wall,
He's goin' up there for to get his ashes hauled.

"How much?" Ghost asked.

The bartender knew the signs of trouble. He smiled warmly. "Oh, it's a happy night," he said. "Let's call this one free."

Ghost glared at him. "I don't want anything free," he said. "How much I owe you."

"Look, son," the bartender said, "nobody wants any trouble in here. We got enough trouble just being alive. If you're carrying a gun, or if you got a knife, and if you got problems—well, you'll just have to sweat it out the best way you can, but peaceable like." His eyes, unwavering, but friendly, stayed with Ghost.

You're playing in my orchard, now don't you see,
If you don't like my peaches stop shaking my tree.
Oh tell me how long, how long must I wait.

"Now you're a white man," the bartender went on. "You walk in here to our bar, to our neighborhood, looking for trouble. Nobody wants to give it to you, so you might as well go home."

"Okay," Ghost said. He lifted the glass and drank the whiskey in one swallow. It burned his throat. He put a dollar on the bar. "See you around," he said. He turned and edged through the crowd. The hostility had dissipated. "Pardon me." He had to push. "Sorry." He got to the door and out to the street.

There was a lot of night left. A lot of drowning to do. He hailed a cab, gave the address of the *Rendezvous*, and sat back.

The cab tooled through the night crawling streets, hit Olympic and headed west. Ghost had lost the wild anger. The bartender had done that. Now he just wanted to drink himself out of his skull, and he wanted to do it with a friend.

When he entered the *Rendezvous* the band was in the middle of a set. The place was crowded, but these were people up on the money tree, and nothing like the crowd he had just left. It was not a big room, but the tables were crammed in tight and they were all filled. The bandstand was at the end of the room, and there were spotlights on the group. This audience did not join in—they just listened. And Baby Jackson hammered away at his bass, taking the show away from his soloist. The star, Man, the big STAR!

Ghost listened for a few minutes, then he wove through the tables, and passed close to the bandstand. He caught Baby's eyes, got the big smile, and motioned that he would be at the bar. He went on through the smoke and noise, skirting tables, and went up the three steps to the alcove and the bar. The bar was also crowded, but it was mostly women.

Pausing a moment, Ghost looked them over. Beautiful, all of them. That's Hollywood, where beauty is never enough. He went to the bar and took a stool between two girls who both eyed him carefully. They both sat with their backs to the bar and looked out over the room, listening to the music. Ghost faced the bartender. "Double scotch," he said. He sat there staring in the maze of varicolored bottles, reading the labels.

"Light?"

He turned his head. The girl on his right was holding a cigarette up in her fingers. He reached for the matches on the bar, tore one out, struck it and lit the cigarette. He looked at her through the process, and she looked back. Auburn hair cut short and curled, large green eyes, short tilted nose, skin the color of cream, a crimson mouth that was wide and sensual. With better luck she might have been stumping for votes as Miss Rheingold. She moved the cigarette from her lips and blew smoke. Ghost let his eyes drop

to the deep cleavage of her large breasts. She wore a dress cut low enough to dispell any doubts. When she smiled and said, "Thank you," Ghost nodded and turned back to the liquor bottles.

His drink arrived. He stirred the ice cubes with his finger. Broads he needed not. He lifted the drink to his mouth. Amen! I've had enough hookers for one day.

"You alone?"

Ghost turned his head and looked at her. He made a point of looking all around him. "It looks that way, doesn't it?"

"Want to talk?"

"No." He lifted his glass. "I just want to drink." He turned away from her.

"You got problems?"

"Haven't you?"

She affected a laugh. "Wow! You don't want to hear about *that*."

"You are so right." He turned away again. He finished his drink and signaled for the bartender.

"Same thing?" the man asked.

"Same." He took a pack of cigarettes from his pocket and shook one into view.

"May I?" It was the girl on his left. He held out the pack and she took the cigarette. He tapped one out for himself, then struck a match, lighting hers first, then his own. "Thank you," she said.

"It has been my pleasure," he said.

"Are you—"

"I am alone," he said. "I am loaded with problems. I do not want to talk."

She smiled. "A girl's gotta eat," she said.

"Caviar?"

Her laughter was throaty and honest. "Okay," she said, "No pitch." She turned her attention back to the music and the entrance.

"You like jazz?" It was the girl on the right.

"You talking about music?"

"Oh, boy, you're some comedian. Of course music."

"It's hard to tell these days," he said. "Yeah, I like jazz."

"Who do you like?"

"Ghost Wakefield."

She looked as thoughtful as was possible for her, pursing her lips. "Who's he?"

"The world's greatest piano player."

"No kidding. Whatta you know. I never heard of him."

"A common malady these days," he said.

"A what—?"

"What's wrong with the world. A malady. Sickness."

"Oh."

Ghost returned to his drink. He turned the cubes thoughtfully, then downed the drink.

"You're gonna get plastered drinking like that."

"That's the general idea."

"You want company?"

"I thought we settled that. I don't want company. I enjoy drinking alone. Now then, why don't you get lost?"

"Well—I mean, well whatta ya know." The girl slid off the stool. "Take a look, huh?"

Ghost turned. She stood with her hands on her hips, her chest thrusting. "Okay," he said, "I believe it. You're a girl."

The girl registered disgust and annoyance. "Oh, boy, a real comedian. What's the matter with you? You a faggot or something?"

Ghost turned back and ordered another drink. The girl moved away to the far end of the bar. The music blared on, stopping for the explosion of applause, then went on again. Ghost did not bother to look around. He could hear the steady rhythm of the bass. Baby Jackson was good, but the music suffered because of the featured bass, and Ghost knew that the horns played it cool to keep their jobs. What the hell. These people didn't give a damn about jazz. They wanted noise and a personality. They had it. Ghost went through two more drinks, belting them down. He was beginning to feel it. He was able to ignore the ersatz jazz, didn't really give a damn. The girl at the end of the bar was gradually becoming more and more attractive to him. He ordered another drink and added to the bartender, "Take a drink to the young lady down there," he said. "The redhead."

"Waste of time." It was the girl on his left.

"What?"

"She's a drag," the girl said. She turned on the stool and faced the bar. "Her head's as empty as a gourd."

"She has her points."

"Yeah," the girl said, chuckling, "You have to admit that."

"I wasn't looking for an intellectual companion."

"Thought you weren't looking."

Ghost smiled. "I forgot about that." His drink came. "A drink for the lady," he said.

"The usual?" the bartender asked.

"No," the girl said, "bring me a bourbon on the rocks."

The bartender moved off. Ghost knew the answer to his question, but he wanted to hear what she would say. "What's the usual?" he asked.

"Champagne," she said. "Cheap domestic stuff at imported prices. For the suckers."

"I'm not a sucker?"

"Sure," she said. "Most men are. But I have the feeling we're in the same club."

"I'm a musician."

"Takes a hustler to know a hustler."

Ghost grinned. She called a spade a spade. He liked it. And she was a beautiful girl, different from the other one, but beautiful. She was older, about twenty-eight, and her eyes harbored the gone dreams of every hustler.

"Your friend is waving," she said.

Ghost looked along the bar. The redhead had forgiven all. He waved and turned back to the girl next to him. He took a cigarette, gave her one, lit them both. The drinks came, and they drank in silence. Finally she said: "I like bourbon." She held the drink up to the light, then put it back on the bar. "The thing I hate most about my line of work is that lousy champagne."

Ghost laughed. They had another drink, then another. He knew that he was going to get blind. But he wasn't thinking about Jess, or Charlie, or anybody else, and that was damned good, damned good. Yes! He said to the girl: "Are you alone?"

"You're stealing my lines. I thought you weren't looking."

"So now I'm looking."

"So you're finding," she said. "Let's have another drink."

"I'm with you."

They ordered another drink. The music stopped. The applause was deafening. The set was over, and Baby was in

front of the microphone. Ghost turned and watched. Baby was sweating and raising his hand to stop the racket, hamming it all the way.

"You're a wonderful audience," Baby said into the mike. "God bless you. And now we're just going to take a breather. You stay right there for the next set." He gave them the personality smile, and stepped down from the stand. He made for the bar, but a dozen fans rose from their chairs and surrounded him.

"You're the most beautiful thing I've ever seen," a woman said. "That bass of yours drives me wild."

"Yeah," Baby said, "I'm all right."

Ghost could hear it all. He laughed. Oh, that Baby, a real cat.

"Wonderful cat," a man said. "Wicked strings."

Baby got by the first group and was making progress, but another group cornered him. The price of fame.

"Baby," a flashy middle-aged woman gushed, "could you come over to our table? My husband is just dying to meet you."

"I know you, lady?"

"I've been an admirer of yours for two years now."

"Crazy. Yes, that's just crazy."

"I love your music," another woman said. "I mean, it's so barbaric."

"Yeah, well, we try, you know."

"If you could just stop by to say hello."

"It really is primitive."

"Yeah, I guess so." Baby kept moving towards the bar and the people followed in his wake. He saw Ghost and rolled his eyes to the ceiling. Ghost winked and grinned.

A beautiful light-skinned negress emerged from the press of people at the end of the bar and approached Baby. He nodded to her, moved in her direction.

"Hi ya, sweetie," he said. He bent to kiss her lightly. The group was still behind him.

"I'd like to talk to you," the girl said.

"Got my drink?" Baby asked.

"Well, could you?" the woman behind him asked.

Baby turned. "Could I what, doll?"

"Meet my husband—?"

Ghost shook his head and turned back to the bar. He lifted his glass in a toast. "To a better world," he said.

"Impossible," the girl said.

"To the impossible," Ghost said.

"The optimist."

They drank, then ordered new drinks. Ghost turned and carefully studied the girl. "Yes," he said finally, "I think we'll swing."

"You have any money?"

"No, but I've got a Diner's Club card."

"My luck."

Ghost turned and looked to where Baby was standing. He was backed against a mirrored pole, the crowd of admirers surrounding him. He was making "bass" sounds with his mouth. Ghost chuckled. He turned back to the girl. "Excuse me a minute. Be right back."

"I'm the faithful type," she said.

Angling through the crowd, Ghost approached the fringe of Baby's admirers. Baby was still making the "bass" sounds, then he stopped. "Then the sax breaks in, see," he said, "then the trombone, and the whole ensemble. I break them and they cut out, leaving me alone for the finish. Boom . . . boom . . . boom . . . boom—" He saw Ghost and began to laugh. He lifted both hands above his head. "Ghost!" he shouted. "Ghost, man, come in here! Hey, let that boy in here."

The circle parted. Baby threw his arms around Ghost as though he hadn't seen him for years. "Baby, I love you! Where you been? I mean, man, you never come around." He turned Ghost to the group surrounding him. "This is the coolest, craziest, most mixed-upest, terriblest, sexiest cat ever-ever." He ended this tirade with a laugh that rose to a wild giggle. "Ghost, man, I want you to meet—uh—man, I don't know their names." He began to laugh again and the admirers joined him.

Moving up next to Ghost, the beautiful negress said, "Baby, I gotta go home."

"Now wait a minute, Sweetheart. This is my girl, Ghost. Ain't she a beauty? She's Baby's girl."

"Baby's girl is tired."

"Baby's girl is tired," Baby repeated. "But she don't know who she is with. You know what this man does? He plays for

deaf and dumb children. For negro orphanages. Ghost, here, is a great man, Darling, you treat him with respect."

"How about using a little of that respect on me."

"What did you say?"

"I said I'm tired," the girl muttered.

Baby stared at her a moment, then he turned to Ghost, ignoring her. "Women," he said, "they're all alike. How are the boys?"

Ghost felt sorry for the girl, but it wasn't his scene. Hell, he had troubles of his own. "Still hitting the old fresh air circuit," he said.

"You're great, man, I mean great. I could be a great man too. I mean, I am great, too. You see the show tonight?"

"Yeah," Ghost said, "you were swinging."

"We always swing, man. I do all the arrangements now. Social work is fine, but who the hell appreciates you? I got me a brand new car, a beautiful home in a good district. I got me a girl here, there, y'know. I got money in the pocket. I play what I love, the people love it. You see, man, everybody puts you down for not making it. You could do both —for charity and for real."

Ghost wondered when you started making excuses for playing badly. He guessed it was when you started telling yourself that you were great.

"Nice meeting you," Baby's girl said to Ghost. She glared at Baby. "Sorry, I can't say the same for you." She turned and started through the ring of people.

"C'mon, Honey," Baby said, "don't go home."

"I want to! I told you, I'm tired."

"You mad at me?"

"Yes."

"You hurt me, Honey."

"What are you trying to prove?"

"Trying to prove nothing, man! I can't change anything."

"There are some things you might change. Right now you're changing girls." She turned abruptly and pushed a woman aside to get past.

Baby scowled and turned to Ghost, shaking his head. "Hey, man!" he said. "Tonight was great, a great night. And it's been real good to see you. Lookit them around here, Ghost. Lookit them. All the people loving me. You loving me, right? And I got to be put down by my own race."

"She just wanted to see you alone."

"Yeah, I know. Hell." He shook his head again. "Guess I better go after her. See you around, huh?"

"Sure."

Baby pushed through the throng in pursuit of the girl. The admirers drifted off when he left. Ghost stood a moment, then shrugged and went back to his place at the bar. There was a man standing in his place, his elbow on the bar, talking to the girl.

Ghost stopped. This was his trouble day. The girl wasn't worth it; a hooker, one of the passing parade. But the nervousness was on him, and he hated it. He could just keep going, walk on past and forget the girl. But, man, you can't keep walking away from yourself! He walked up to the girl and faced the man. "She's with me," he said.

The stranger looked at him, then at the girl. She shrugged. "Sorry," the guy said, "no offense."

"It's okay," Ghost said. The man moved away and Ghost reached for his drink. He drained it. "You ready to cut out?"

"What's your hurry?"

"You're my hurry."

"Ahhh." She smiled. "You say pretty things." She emptied her glass. "Let's go."

They left the club. There was a line of cabs waiting against the curb at the entrance. Ghost started to signal, and the girl said, "We can walk. It's just a couple of blocks."

"Shall we get a jug?"

"Good idea. There's a liquor store on the way." She slid her hand into the crook of Ghost's elbow and leaned against him. "Y'know," she said, "I think I like you."

"That makes it better?"

"That makes it awful," she said ruefully, "I always forget to charge."

They walked two blocks, bought the bottle of scotch, then went on to her building. It was stucco on the outside, like many of the older buildings in Hollywood. They walked through a foyer that smelled of age, and took the elevator to the sixth floor. They were both unsteady on their feet. They stumbled along the carpeted hall and stopped at her door. She produced a key, opened the door, and they moved inside.

It was a nondescript furnished apartment. The sofa and chair were overstuffed and the cushions were sprung and lumpy. The walls were a depressing yellow color. The rug was worn and frayed in spots. There were several framed prints on the walls. The lamps, the tables, the drapes were all cheap, the sort of thing you find in any second-rate hotel. There was a small kitchenette.

"Come into my office," the girl said. She led the way into the bedroom. This room had more personality. The walls were a cool pastel green. The rug was almost new. There was a warmth in this room that was lacking in the other.

"This is nice," Ghost said.

"Well, I spend most of my time here," she said. "Get comfortable. I'll get some water and ice." She left the room.

Ghost sat on the edge of the bed and unknotted his tie. He had had enough to drink to float a small boat, and he was feeling it. But he didn't feel drunk. His mind was more relaxed than usual, but he was still thinking. He gazed about the room. What am I doing here? This can't possibly mean anything. I don't like this kind of scene. I don't like whores. So that's why I'm here, because I don't like me either. He pulled his coat off and tossed it onto a chair.

The girl arrived with the drinks. She handed him his glass. "Some water?"

"No. Just straight."

"To the impossible," she said.

"Amen."

They drank, Ghost sitting on the bed, the girl standing. She placed her drink on the bedside table. She kicked off her shoes, then reached back and unhooked her dress. She pulled it over her head. She went to the closet and put the dress away. Ghost watched her movements, intrigued by her matter-of-factness, the cool attitude. She removed the slip, then the stockings, each movement calculated, but graceful. When she was nude she came back to the bed.

"You like?" she asked.

"You're a girl," Ghost said. "What more can I say?"

Her laugh was low and throaty. "Man," she said, "you kill me. C'mon, drink up." She crawled past him and stretched out on the bed.

Ghost turned and looked at her. It was a beautiful body.

It was her stock and trade and she took good care of it. Ghost lifted his eyes to her face. She was staring back at him.

"Does this mean anything to you?" he asked.

"Hey, c'mon, let's not start that stuff."

"No, seriously, does it mean anything?"

"Look, fella, I've heard all the lectures. What's a nice girl like you doing in a racket like this? How did I ever get started? Look, it's a living. I enjoy my work. So let's not worry it to death, huh?"

Ghost nodded. "Yeah," he said. He finished his drink. He stared at the empty glass for a long minute, then he got up and put it down on the table. He puffed out his cheeks, then shrugged and reached for his tie. He put it around his neck, letting the end hang down the front of his shirt. He picked up his coat and slung it over his shoulder.

The girl frowned. "What's the score?" she asked. "You taking off?"

Ghost nodded. He rummaged in his pocket and brought out some bills. He took a crumpled twenty and dropped it on the bed.

"What's wrong," the girl said with concern. She raised on her elbow. "Hey, forget the money, huh? Just come to bed."

Ghost shook his head. "It's gotta mean something," he said. "Don't ask me why, because I don't know. But I know that some things gotta mean something."

"But I like you."

"That's not enough. Look, I'm not putting you down. I dig you. In another time we might have swung together. But I know that I don't feel anything, and I know that you don't either. There are some things, some beliefs that you have to hang onto."

"I don't get it. Why did you bother coming here?"

"I don't know," he said, "I sure as hell don't know."

"Sit here a minute." She patted the bed at her side. "Just for a minute."

He stared down at her. He shrugged and sat down. She moved up close to him. She lifted her arms and joined her hands behind his neck. She lifted her mouth to be kissed. He leaned over her and kissed her. She came up against him and kissed him with practiced passion. He broke away and sat back.

"I mean it," he said, "it's no good. I know it sounds corny, but this sort of thing always sounds corny."

She took his hands in hers. She lifted them and placed them over her breasts.

"Look," Ghost said, "this isn't a challenge. Don't think of it like that. I'm not putting you down. It's me. It's the way I feel, that's all." He removed his hands and stood up.

"Well, I tried," she said.

"You're okay," Ghost said.

"Yeah, I'm great."

He took his coat and walked to the doorway. He stopped and looked back. "What's your name?"

"Helen."

"Well, goodnight, Helen. Thanks, huh?"

"Hey, wait!" She sat up on the bed. "Why don't you just sleep here. We don't have to do anything."

"No," he said, shaking his head. "I've already lost too much of myself today. See you around."

He left the apartment.

CHAPTER NINE

FOR A MOMENT he thought the hammering was in his head, but then he realized that someone was beating on his door. He pulled the pillow over his ears to shut out the persistent sound, but it was impossible.

"Okay," he shouted. The hammering ceased. He groaned, afraid to open his eyes. His head throbbed. His mouth seemed to be full of cotton. He sat up in the rumpled bed and clutched his head with both hands.

"Ghost! C'mon, man, open up!"

"Okay, okay."

He slept in his shorts. He twisted, moving his legs over the side of the bed. His feet touched the floor.

"C'mon, Ghost!"

"Awright, for Crissakes!"

He stood up. He groped on a chair for his trousers and pulled them up over his legs.

"Ghost!"

"Who is it?"

"Benny."

"Crazy. Just a minute." He zipped the pants and buttoned them at the waist. He shuffled to the door and opened it.

"Man, I been hammering on that door for an hour."

"I was asleep."

"You look awful."

"I feel awful." Ghost padded to the bed and sat down. He closed his eyes and held his head. He groaned and lifted his head. "I feel like the 8th Armored Division just walked over me."

Benny chuckled. "Playboy of the Western World," he said. "When ya play, ya gotta pay."

"Yeah, great. You're a philosopher, Benny. You got a cigarette?"

"You bet." Benny produced a cigarette and Ghost put it between his lips.

"Match?"

Benny lit a match and touched it to the cigarette. Ghost inhaled deeply. "You wouldn't have a cup of coffee by any chance? No, I guess not. Oh, man, do I feel awful, I mean just awful!"

"What happened to you last night?"

"I got drunk."

"I can see that," Benny said. "I mean, where'd you go?"

"Here and there."

"I was worried about you."

"I'll bet you were."

"I mean it, man, I was worried. I dropped by Jess' to have a word with you and Charlie Sachs was there."

"Hurrah for Charlie."

Benny did not answer for a moment. He stared down at Ghost, waiting.

"Well, whatta want me to do?" Ghost snapped, "Throw a fit? So the girl's a bimbo. So I was wrong, so what? She was with Charlie. Tonight she'll be with somebody else. You come here this early to gloat?"

"You know better than that, man. I'm your friend. I'm your agent, remember?"

"Agent, yes. Friend, no."

"Hell, Ghost, that's no way to talk. I come here because I was concerned."

"Benny, let's cut the crap, huh? Like you say, this ain't amateur night in Dixie. I feel awful. I'm sick and I got a head. I don't feel like trading any crap. Okay?"

"You don't understand me, boy."

"I understand you plenty, Benny, so let's just cut the crap. Whatta you want?"

"Well, okay," Benny said. "You wanta hard nose it, okay. But you know that you're supposed to record today."

"I know. So what?"

"So what about Charlie? What about the girl?"

"I wasn't there," Ghost said bitterly. "I assume he made her."

"That's not what I meant."

Ghost rose from the bed. He looked at Benny with distaste, then passed him and entered the small bathroom. He turned in the doorway. "Just what *do* you mean?"

"Dammit, man, whatta you want to do about the girl? Polanski, I mean. It will be difficult with her singing with the group."

Ghost took a deep breath. His eyes narrowed. "She don't sing with the group," he said. "She's dead."

"Okay, so whatta I do for a singer?"

"For Chrissakes, Benny, you're supposed to be a great agent. What do I care where you get another singer. That's your business." He turned and went to the wash basin. He turned on the water and reached for his tooth brush.

Benny stood in the doorway. "What do I tell Frielobe?"

"You're the agent, Benny," Ghost said, his expression pained. "Tell the sonofabitch anything you want."

"What do I tell the boys?"

Ghost took a deep breath and raised his eyes to the ceiling. He tapped the tooth brush on the basin impatiently, then he glared at Benny and said, "Whatta ya mean, tell the boys. Tell the boys what?"

"Well, hell, Ghost, they're gonna wonder about Jess."

"Let 'em wonder!" He wagged the tooth brush at Benny. "You tell 'em nothing! Nothing at all! I've had it with this buddy-buddy crap. My private life is my own. The girl's an amateur. I don't have to justify it!"

"Okay," Benny said, "whatever you think."

"That's what I think. Now, let's forget it. I'm up to here with it."

"Okay, okay. I'll get another girl."

"Good. You do that. Now how about splitting out of here, huh? I'd like to quietly die in peace."

"Okay." He did not move. He took a cigar from his pocket and lit it. Ghost was leaning over the sink, scrubbing his teeth. Benny waited until he was finished. "You know, Ghost," he said, "if this is too difficult we can still blow it. I mean, y'know, man, what Frielobe is offering is an insult."

"I'll be there," Ghost said.

"Okay, if that's the way you want it."

"That's it, now blow, willya?"

"Four o'clock," Benny said.

"What time is it now?"

Benny checked his watch. "Twelve-thirty."

"Okay, I'll see ya. Leave me a cigarette, will ya?"

"I left you the pack. I bought 'em for you. Never touch the things myself."

"Thanks."

"You just don't know what a friend I really am."

"I know, Man, I know. I hate to think what those butts are going to cost me." He went to the door and opened it. "See you around."

"I don't know why I take so much insult off you."

"Because I'm a talent, Benny, that's why. Now blast off. I got things to do."

Shaking his head, Benny went through the door. Ghost closed it after him. He stood for a moment with his hand on the knob, then he turned and walked back to the bed. He got a cigarette from the table and lit it. He dropped down on the bed and stared up at the ceiling.

Now what? It's another day, man, a new day. But this is a big one, because on this day old Ghost Wakefield has got to come up with some answers. This is a new life starting today. The old life went down the drain yesterday at Nick's. You blew that one, man, you clinkered that baby but good. What's important? I mean, man, you got to decide what's important.

Damn her! Damn all broads short and tall! We were ready to go, ready to go all the way, and she had to foul it up. Damn her! Damn her for being so goddamned beautiful, and damn it all to hell that I have to be so goddamned much in love with her!

CHAPTER TEN

PETE WAS playing. He sat hunched over in a chair, his horn pointing at the floor, and showed Red how Bunny Berigan got his special vibrato. Shelley was tightening his snare, rapping it with his fingers, his head cocked to listen. Charlie was sprawled in a chair, his legs outstretched, a cigarette dangling in his lips. A strange girl, a short-legged brunette, sat in a chair away from the group and read a magazine. An engineer moved around, setting up the mikes.

The lights were bright in the center of the room. Ghost had entered quietly and he stood in the shadows by the door.

"Where the hell is he?" Frielobe asked. He was pacing in front of the control booth, glancing at his watch. Benny sat at the table.

"He'll be here," Benny said.

"Well, it better be soon," Frielobe said. "Dammit, Benny, you know how busy I am. Every minute costs money. I

mean, what is this, amateur night in Dixie? I've had my fill of prima donnas. I mean, I need this Wakefield like I need cancer. Who's going to pay the musicians overtime?"

"Don't worry about it," Benny said.

"These unions kill you. Got to be independently wealthy to survive the 802. Where's the girl? She with him?"

"No," Benny said, "we got a new girl."

Frielobe stopped his pacing and faced Benny. "Whatta ya mean, you got a new girl? I don't want a new girl. I want that no-singing."

"You'll get it," Benny said, raising a placating hand. "Just take it easy, Milt. There's no sweat. You said yourself that the other one's voice was too foggy. This one's got a clean voice."

"She better be good."

"She's wonderful, Milt. Would I lie?"

"You'd sell your mother. Where's Wakefield?"

"I told you. He'll be here."

"I give him three minutes." Frielobe went back to his pacing. Benny grimaced and wiped the sweat from his brow. He got up from the chair with a grunt and walked over to the piano. Pete stopped his playing, and looked up at Benny.

"What happened to the Princess?" Pete asked.

Benny shrugged, but Charlie said, "She got shook up by the fight last night. She don't want to be a singer no more."

"She quit?" Pete asked with surprise. Shelley and Red looked up.

"Yeah, man," Charlie said. "Don't want to play no more."

"I'd cut my arm off first," Pete said.

"I sure figured her wrong," Red said. "I figured her for a real swinger."

"Damn," Shelley said, "that's too bad. I really liked her. Aside from the singing, you know. I mean, she was nice, y'know."

"World's full of them," Charlie said.

"Yeah, but she was different."

"Who's this chick?" Pete asked.

"Carol Samuels," Benny said. "Good voice."

"Ugly chick," Pete said, "didn't even say hello."

The girl heard it and looked up from her magazine. Her

face was expressionless as though she couldn't care less what anyone thought of her.

"You'll meet her," Benny said. "When the right time comes."

"Ghost know about Jess?" Red asked.

"Who knows," Charlie said.

Ghost had heard enough. He didn't want to be standing there when they got started on him. He opened the door quietly and closed it hard, as though he had just come in. He walked into the light.

"It's about time," Frielobe barked.

"I'm here, man, don't sweat it. You ready?"

"Yes, *Mister* Wakefield. We're ready. We've been ready for a half hour."

"Good," Ghost said, ignoring Frielobe's sarcasm. He crossed the room, nodding to the boys. He went directly to Carol Samuels and stood before her chair. She looked up from her magazine, but she didn't bother to put on her smile. He stared at her a moment, then he said: "We're not gonna need you, honey. We're not gonna record a vocal." The girl arched her eyebrow and sat back. Ghost turned away from her and went to the piano.

"Whatta you talking about?" Benny asked in a loud whisper.

"We're not going to record the Blues number," Ghost said.

"What?"

"What's the matter?" Frielobe said, coming over to the piano. "Trouble?"

"I got it, Milt," Benny said. "Just let me handle this."

"What's wrong, kid?" Frielobe asked, ignoring Benny.

"I'm not happy about playing the Blues number," Ghost answered. "We were just discussing what else we could give you."

"That's great!" Frielobe said. "That's just great! First we get a different singer. Now we get a different number. What am I buying here?"

"Sorry," Ghost said, "that's how I feel."

"I want what we agreed on," Frielobe said. "Nothing more, nothing less."

"Let's take it easy," Benny said. "Milt, I don't think he's happy about the price."

"Benny and I worked it out," Frielobe said. "We agreed."

"Work it out for me," Ghost said.

"You have your deal," Frielobe said, "and it's not changing. What the hell is this, Benny?"

"Well, Milt, I'll have to admit that what you're offering isn't really enough."

"Not enough?" Frielobe exploded. "For what? Not enough for a bunch of discord artists? Come on, let's be honest. Where was your last job? Let's be honest, now. What did you get? Just how much did you get?" He stood with his hands on his hips, his face red, his head nodding. "Let's be honest, shall we? Let's face a few facts!" He did a half-turn and took in the rest of the group. They were sitting up, listening intently, their expressions puzzled by Ghost's sudden change. "You guys need Gold Star," Frielobe said. "You have a chance, one chance, and it's right here, right now. Not tomorrow, and not playing in back rooms."

"Now, wait a minute, Milt," Benny pleaded.

"I'm tired of waiting!" He waved his hand at the singer. "Let's hear the girl. Honey, stand up and let me take a look at you."

"No!" Ghost snapped. "I'm not selling the Blues."

Benny clapped a hand to his forehead. "Oh, man," he said, "where do I find them?"

Frielobe was silent. He turned and glared at Ghost. He glanced at his watch, then up again. "That's final?"

"Ghost!" Shelley said. "Let's don't blow it, huh? We got a chance here. Let's record the Blues, it's good. We're not compromising."

"No."

"You're not the only one in the group, man," Charlie said.

"You think not?"

"Ghost," Pete said, "think about that empty park, huh, man? Look, fella, we've strung along with you on anything you wanted. Let's don't forget it. All the charities, all the clowning around. What's so important about money all of a sudden?"

"Sure," Red said, turning on his grin. "Let's cut the record, Ghost. What did we come here for?"

"Come on, Ghost, don't chicken out now. We're saying fine things, man. Let's let the people hear."

"You don't know this guy, Mr. Frielobe," Red said. "He's not interested in money."

"Is that so?"

"Come on, Baby," Shelley said. He nodded at Ghost who said nothing, then turned to Frielobe. "Okay, he's in."

"No!" Ghost snapped. He swung away from the piano. He walked several steps in the direction of the door, then he turned. He looked at Charlie with hatred, then lifted his gaze to include the others. They were silent, watching him, their mouths open in stunned surprise. "Let's get something straight," he began, his voice cold and calculating. "Let's *be* honest." He paused and nodded his head. "None of you guys know anything about my music." His tone was venomous. "I own the Blues. I wrote. I scored it. And I played it, too. And I sweat over it and cry tears over it. And what do you do?"

"Take it easy, man," Shelley said.

"You gripe, that's what. You gripe. If you didn't want to play charities, you didn't have to."

"Nobody said—"

"Nobody said! Are you kidding? You're saying plenty right now! Where were you guys blowing when I picked you up? Nowhere—that's where!"

"Now wait a minute, big man!"

"You're nothing!" Ghost shouted, the muscles standing out in his neck. "None of you! Hangers-on. Phonies. You want to make it big? You want fame? Okay. Go write your own stuff! But get off my back, because I'm not carrying you anymore."

"Ghost!" Red shouted, leaping to his feet. "Man, what's bugging you?" He ran to Ghost to throw his arms around him. Ghost sidestepped him. Snarling, Ghost drove his elbow into Red's face. Red dropped to his knees, the blood spurting from his nose.

"You sonofabitch!" Shelley was on his feet. He kicked his drums out of the way and hurtled towards Ghost.

"Leave him alone!" Red shouted. He leaped to his feet and threw himself against Shelley.

"I'll kill the creep!" Shelley shouted. He spit at Ghost. "Ya fink!"

"Leave him alone," Red repeated. "He's not worth it. Let him drop dead."

"Fink!"

Ghost turned and started for the door. Benny caught up with him and steered him to one side. Pete and Charlie were already packing their instruments. Shelley was dabbing at Red's nose with a handkerchief. The girl folded her magazine and got to her feet.

"What's going on here?" Frielobe shouted. He ran to everyone, waving his arms, but he received no answer.

"I'm getting out of here," Ghost said. "You coming?"

"Am I still in?" Benny asked.

"You're my agent, aren't you?"

"You sure—?"

"Sure I'm sure. C'mon, let's get out of here. I've had enough of these deadbeats."

Charlie came up next to Ghost. "No hard feelings, man," he said. "That's how she crumbles. I got no beef. You don't want this, okay. You're the leader. You need a horn. I'm around. You're the best, man. These cats don't understand a professional. Later, huh, man?" He tapped his knuckles lightly on Ghost's shoulder and moved off. He went out through the door.

The girl singer sidled up. She ignored Ghost and said to Benny: "You through with me?"

"Yeah, honey," Benny said. "Thanks a lot. Sorry it blew up. Your check is at the union. No fee for this job."

"That's up to you, Ben. Call me. I'm in the book."

"Yeah, I'll do that."

She went to the door. Frielobe bustled up. He waved his cigar in Benny's face. "So long, Ben," he snarled, "call me in a year or so."

"Sorry, Milt." Benny turned to Ghost. "You ready?"

"Yeah, let's go."

Ghost paused at the doorway and glanced back. Red was in a chair with his head leaning back to stop the bleeding. Shelley was holding his head. It was like looking back onto another life. He had the compelling urge to go back. There were things to say to those two. Everything had gotten out of hand. He had to say something to Red. What? I didn't mean it? Hell, it wasn't an accident. Maybe just apologize. Shelley looked up.

"Fink!"

"Let's go," Ghost snapped. He whirled and passed through the door.

The others were gone when they emerged from the building.

"Let's get a drink," Benny said. "We got things to talk about."

"Okay." Ghost was subdued. It had gone the way he had planned it. Nobody else was going to sing that Blues. Nobody. That music, with its lowdown, mournful chords, the wailing melody that came out of the guts and reached and reached, reached for—for something; that was John Wakefield, his blood, his soul. He had given it all, the soul, the blues. And now it was dead. No soul; no Blues.

They entered a bar on the Strip. It was early and the place was almost empty. They sat in a booth and a waitress took their order.

"We still friends?" Ghost asked.

"Friends?" Benny tapped his cigar in an ash tray and stared down at the table. He looked up, leaning back against the booth. "I can honestly say that I hate your guts. I been plenty of bastards in my time, and I've met some better than me, but you take the cake. We could probably make a fortune taking bets from skeptics who wouldn't believe that you could crawl under a rock. But what I think of you doesn't matter. You're talented. My job is to service talented people."

"Well, I don't like you either, *friend*, so you can start servicing."

"What do you want to do?"

"I don't care."

"Well, I care. I got no time for failures."

"Then make me a success."

"You want to start at the top?"

"Why not? That's where the bread is, isn't it? Well, that's where I want to be."

Benny regarded him evenly for a full minute. He nodded his head. "Okay," he said. "Now then, I know a rich, fairly attractive woman who spends fortunes sponsoring the careers of goodlooking, mean jazz musicians."

Ghost took it in, got the message. He shrugged. "What do I have to do?"

"Just the usual. Nothing complicated."

"You say she's attractive?"

"Would it make any difference?"

Ghost pursed his lips and stared down at his hands on the black table top. He lifted his eyes. "Nope."

"That's what I thought."

"When do we get together?"

"I'll make the phone call."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

HELL, it was worse than junk.

A skin-popper, now, he ties up the arm and works the pump until that old vein is bulging out like a blood sausage, and he makes the happy jab, and he shoots the horse into that great big purple vein. Endsville! I mean, man, he can settle back and cool it, because he's out of it. Ain't nothing going to bother an old speedballer just so long as he's got a supply. Take it, now, you lay it on mean to an old hophead, I mean, a cat who had that monkey riding there so long he figure it's his best friend; you say: "Now, look, stud, you better kick the shit or you gonna be swingin' in the old bury-hole." Why, now, he'll come right back and say: "You split your way, man, I'll split mine." That's because he's out of it. You can't tell him that shooting horse is going to kill him, because he know that what kill most everybody is living too long, and nobody stops living just because it's going to kill him. Like that. Old skin-popper

knows about the *dream*, because he's been there and gone, and he knows that everybody is just trying to connect with the *dream*. Line them up. Man or woman, and you'll find a *dream* they never made. No connection. Old junkie's got it knocked. He got a connection. He got a dream.

Ghost was hooked, but you can't fly on self-pity. He turned away from the *dream*, and Benny was there to lead him. He took him up the long steps and started him down the slide. There were opiates. You don't slide without the opiates.

There was the Countess. Like Benny said, she was fairly attractive. Her stable was empty when Benny called that day, and Ghost was wearing her colors the next. Her forty-five years were a tribute to the cosmetics industry. She looked thirty-five to everyone—except Ghost. He saw her while the world slept. But he didn't mind, because he never made love to her—he made hate. There was the sports car, the apartment, the clothes. And there was steady work. The Countess took care of everything—including the work. And Ghost took care of the Countess. The good life.

Ghost had it figured for a month. What the hell. Pick up a little reputation, time to look for some good boys, and then off on his own. But that was yesterday's dream. He knew Jess was gone, and so was Red and Shelley and Pete and Charlie. But what he didn't know—so was Ghost. Left back there in a pool of hate. So it was two months, then three—trying to blow good piano with bad sidemen—four months, then five—loving the Countess—six.

Why? Oh, man, only the squares ask why? Why is a poet making it as a copywriter? Why is the Homecoming Queen of 1950 peddling it for twenty bucks in Kansas City? Why did the star halfback turn out to be as gay as a Chinese flag? Why is that nice girl appearing in stag movies? Why did he ever get involved in politics? Why? Why? Why?

Because that's the way things are!

Who cares *why* you're there? Being there is bad enough. *The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.* A swinger said that. It means: that's the way things are.

Ghost was there. In spades, he was there. Seven months. He didn't give a damn, why? He didn't give a damn. He sat at the piano, the harsh glare of the white spotlight centered on his hands. The bandstand was level with the tables in

the smoke-filled, box-like room. Staring out into the dark, Ghost saw the heads of the audience, the shadowy enemy. The tenorman was blowing wide and loud. The trumpet was waiting for the break. The beat was heavy. The trumpet took it and went for a ride, a strident howling. They played hot jazz and they played it loud, but they didn't swing. Ghost's piano was moody and dissonant and melancholy, but it wasn't the blues. It had none of the clean honesty of tears. The tenor blared at the end. The club lights went up, revealing the sea of faces. Applause rolled over the room. Ghost shrugged and rose from the piano bench. Ghost said nothing to the sidemen. He jumped off the stand, glad that the gig was over, wove his way through the tables. He was tired and he needed a drink.

Pushing through the swinging doors at the rear of the room, Ghost started down the corridor to the dressing room at the end. The muscles of his back ached. He stretched his arms over his head, brought them down again.

"Ghost! Hey, Ghost!"

He stopped and turned. A young "beat" came through the swinging doors with a blonde-haired girl in tow. Ghost waited. The young guy was a stranger. He needed a haircut and he wore a small goatee. The girl was a smiler. She was pretty in a healthy, round-faced way; her chest was immense.

"Ghost," the young guy said, "you were cool."

"Just great," the girl said.

Ghost stared at the girl. He made a point of staring down at her breasts.

"Betty wanted to meet you," the young guy said. "She has eyes for you, man."

Ghost raised his eyes to the girl's face. He catalogued her quickly: Jailbait.

"How about joining us for a drink?" The young guy asked.

Ghost glanced at him and scowled. "I don't know you, man," he snapped. He whirled away, went to the door, opened it and slammed it after him.

"Creep!" Ghost muttered.

The Countess was waiting. She sat in a canvas camp chair, her legs crossed. She was, as usual, immaculately groomed. She wore black. She looked up as Ghost came in. He ignored her. She got up and went to the small portable bar.

"Vodka and tonic?" she asked.
"Scotch."
"Straight?"
"On the rocks," Ghost said. He pulled his tie loose, threw it on the chair, began to unbutton his shirt.
"If I had said on the rocks, you would have wanted it straight."
"I'll make my own drink."
"Don't be like that," she said.
"Like what, for crissakes?"
"Surly."
"I just want a drink without a lot of jazz. I'll get it myself."
"Here it is," she said, holding the glass out to him. "How did it go tonight?"
"Great, just great." He took the drink and placed it on the dressing table. He removed his coat and threw it over the chair. He dropped into a camp chair, propped his feet on the dressing table and reached for the drink. "What a bunch of creeps! Man, it could be me out there, or Harry the butcher from around the block. All the same to them. Put a label on it, call it jazz, and they swallow it. The glasses tinkling, the whispering, the damned waiters clomping their stupid feet. Christ! Who needs this?"
"You do," the Countess said. She was still standing by the bar, her posture regally cool.
"Are you kidding?" Ghost gulped his drink. "It could be Charlie Parker out there and they wouldn't care about anything but the check."
"If you were Parker," she said, "but then you're not. If you were talented, but then you're not that either."
Ghost tossed her the glass, purposely throwing it wide so that she had to lose her composure to catch it. "Why don't you stick to mixing drinks?" he said. "A music expert you're not."
"I've been with a few good musicians in my day."
"I'm not talking about your sex life," Ghost snapped. He rose from the chair and pulled off his shirt.
"Do you actually think you're talented?"
"Make the drink," he said, trying to ignore her, maybe make her shut the hell up, but knowing that she would go on putting in the needle.

"You have the worst sidemen in the world," she said. "They're zombies. Why? You could get some response if you'd take a chance with some decent accompaniment."

"Hand me that robe, will you?"

"I'm getting tired of being pushed around." She handed him the robe.

"Now the drink."

"I said, I'm getting tired—"

"You were tired twenty years ago. You ought to be getting used to being pushed around. It's your style."

"I'm getting bored with it." She handed him the drink. He took it, sipped it, put it down.

"Did I hear you right?"

"Go ahead," she said, "hit me."

"You're tired of being pushed?" Ghost turned away from her. He belted the robe.

"That's right."

"You're bored with me—right?"

"No."

He turned slowly and faced her. "That's what you said."

"I'm bored with pretending that you're a success," she said wearily. "Tired of making like you're a hero. You're as insecure as I am; just as disillusioned and cheap as I am, and I'm bored pretending it's any other way."

Ghost's hand was trembling. His face was livid and he was choking on the anger. "There's one difference," he said, pointing his finger at her. "One big difference. You just take a look at yourself in that mirror." He waved at the mirror, but she kept her eyes on him. "Look in the mirror, damn you!" he screamed. "There! There's the difference. *I* don't pay for *you*, now do I? Now do I?" He was breathing heavily. "You want to be here, don't you? You want to subsidize my music, don't you?"

"Subsidize your what?"

"Music."

Her laughter was forced and tinged with hysteria. "Oh, darling," she said, "what a charming new name for it."

"Don't go too far," Ghost growled.

"But really, darling, music." She laughed again. "If I wanted music, I'd buy records. I subsidize you for one thing."

He closed the gap between them in two steps. His arms

shot out and he back-handed her across the face. Her head snapped. Her eyes widened with shock. The imprint of his hand was white, then red, on her face.

"You shouldn't have done that."

"I told you to cool it."

"That was a stupid thing to do. That did it. I want out from you."

"You want what?"

"Out! Are you deaf? Out!"

"Come here!" He said. He grabbed her arms, bruising the flesh with a vise-like grip. "You want out, huh?"

"Ghost, that hurts!"

"I'll tell you what you want, and it ain't out!" He swung her around. She grimaced in pain, but she did not cry out. He pulled her across the room and threw her down on a couch. "You want out, huh?"

"Damn you!" She leaped to her feet. He slapped her across the face. His palm first, then the backhand. She fell back onto the couch. She drew her knees up and buried her face in her hands. She began to weep, silently, but her shoulders trembled. He stood over her, nodding with satisfaction. His expression was grim. He turned and went to the closet. He brought out a clean shirt and began to put it on.

"I'll tell you when you get out," he said.

There was a knock on the door. Ghost was buttoning the shirt. He stopped and faced the door. The Countess sat up quickly. She dabbed at her eyes with her fingers, then stood and straightened her dress.

"Who is it?"

"Benny Flowers."

Ghost opened the door. "Well, whatta ya know," he said. Benny entered with a young girl, a beautiful brunette.

"Hello, Idealist," Benny said with obvious sarcasm, "I want you to meet Billy Grey." He nodded at the girl. "Ghost Wakefield. Hello, Countess."

"Hello, Benny."

Ghost stepped back from the door, his hands on his hips. He shook his head. "I'm shocked," he said. "I'm honestly honored and shocked." He turned to the girl. "Billy. That's right, isn't it?"

"Yes," the girl said, "Billy Grey."

"Well, Billy Grey, this man here, this Benny Flowers, is my agent. I haven't seen him for a year. I thought he was dead."

"You kill me, kid," Benny said, brandishing his cigar. "Don't you know? I'm a myth, a legend. Right, Countess?"

"To what do we owe the honor of this visit?" Ghost asked.

"I'm in real estate," Benny said, "a rental broker. I came to show Billy the dressing room. She's moving in on the thirteenth."

"A bad luck day," the Countess said.

"Luck is what you make it." Benny turned to Ghost and smiled. "That right, Artist?" He turned to Billy. "Now, honey, you take a look around. Take your time. Tell me what you want done, and if it's possible I'll have it attended to."

The girl began to move around, examining the room. She opened the closet door.

"I hear there's a new club opening in San Francisco," Ghost said.

"Yeah," Benny said, "the Blue Ballroom. Nice, real nice. But it's too rich for your blood. Right, Countess?"

"How much?" the Countess said.

"You talk to me!" Ghost said.

Benny ignored him and turned to the Countess. "You don't have enough. The place only takes names. No exceptions."

"Benny," Billy Grey said in her sugar voice, "can we get a new shower?"

"Sure, honey, that's easy."

"What do you mean—names?"

"I'd really prefer a bath," Billy said, pouting. "But I suppose that would be pretty difficult."

"What do I look like?" Ghost shouted, his hands knotted into fists. "Whatta you mean, names?"

"Let's settle for a tub," Benny said. He flicked cigar ash on the floor.

"I get top money!" Ghost ranted. "This is a top spot. This is Los Angeles!"

"So?"

"Can we change the curtains, Benny?"

"What do they need in the way of credits? I've played the top spots on the West Coast!"

"Benny, the curtains?"

"Sure, honey, nothing to it."

"I never lost nobody a dime. I'm hot right now. Whatta you trying to pull?"

"They wouldn't take you," Benny said.

"Can I pick out some wallpaper?"

"Sure, honey."

"Will you, for crissakes, stop with the goddamned wallpaper, already?!" Ghost screamed. "This happens to be my dressing room!"

The girl smiled, but ignored him. "And a new dressing table," she said. "That would be all right, wouldn't it Benny?"

"Of course."

"Are you my agent, or what?" Ghost said, spreading his hands before him. "I'm talking to you."

"Could we do anything about the entrance-way? It looks like a garbage dump."

"I don't think so, Billy, but I'll check. Maybe we could get a nice white rug in here. Would you like that?"

A cry of rage caught in Ghost's throat. He grabbed a water bottle from the dressing table and smashed it onto the floor. "I'm talking to you!" he screamed.

"What is it?" Benny said in a quiet voice.

Ghost glared at him with hatred. His teeth were clenched. "I want to know," he said with deliberate calm, "where I go after this?"

"I don't know right now," Benny said.

"Well, when are you going to make up your mind?"

"I'm not the one who decides your bookings. The owners of the clubs work that out and it's complicated. I'll call the Countess tomorrow."

"You call *me* tomorrow," Ghost snapped.

"Yeah, okay. I'll call the Countess tomorrow. Right now like I said, I'm in real estate. A rental broker." He turned his back on Ghost. "What do you think, Billy?"

"It's fine."

"Benny," Ghost said, "get bird-brain out of here. I want to talk to you alone."

"Hey! Who you calling bird-brain?"

"You picked a bad time," Benny said. "I'm real busy. Have the Countess call me tomorrow."

"I still want to know who you think you're calling—"

Ghost rushed across the room and jerked the door open. He grabbed Billy Grey by the arm and whirled her out into the hallway.

"Hey!" she squealed.

Ghost slammed the door. He fell back against it, his face contorted and glistening with sweat. He lifted his finger and pointed it at Benny. His breath came in gasps and his voice was desperate. "Now you listen," he said.

"What is this?"

"You listen to me, you hear?"

"Look, I told you. Let the Countess—"

"Listen!"

Benny was startled into silence. The room was quiet, except for Ghost's heavy breathing. "You listen to me," Ghost said. "I've had this gigolo bit. I need another job, Benny. I'll take a cut. I don't have to stay here in Swank Town. I'll play in one of the downtown clubs."

"You better stay here, Ghost."

"I'm telling you to find me another spot."

"You don't seem to get the point—"

"Are you kidding? They loved me out there. I've never played better in my life. Tonight, when I finished, at least twenty people came after me for autographs, wanting to talk, inviting me to parties."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. I know fifteen groups right off the bat that would take me. Top feature. Within a week I could form my own group with some of the best men in the business."

"Once maybe," Benny said, shaking his head. "But not now."

"Whatta you mean, not now? Whatta you mean, not now?" His voice rose steadily. He lurched forward and grasped Benny by the lapels. "Whatta you mean?"

Benny gripped his wrists, pulling the hands away from his coat. "I mean a hundred guys can play what you play now. A hundred." He worked the hands loose and shoved them aside. He smoothed out the lapels. "And ninety-nine can play it better."

"That's your opinion. I sit up there at the piano and play for these stupid night club addicts and they love it."

"If they loved it, you'd be a top name."

Ghost leaned back against the door. He seemed to fall apart. His shoulders sagged and his head was bowed. He talked almost to himself. "I never sold my soul. I sold me. I sold this." He made an obscene gesture. "But I never sold my soul, man, never. I play what I like, and no compromises."

"That doesn't pay my overhead."

"You name me one guy in the business who knows anything about music." He was fighting from a new tack, still trying, but still avoiding the truth. And the truth sat there like a twelve-pound monkey waiting to climb on. "There's just nobody. I don't care who it is. They don't know good from bad. It's all just a matter of opinion. You see, nobody ever walked out on me, Benny."

Benny shrugged. He glanced at the floor, shifting on his feet. He looked up. "You had it once," he said. "When you had the group, you had it."

"Leave them out of it."

"No, no. I gotta say this. You guys were trying to say something when you played. It was real. You meant it. And there was a nice feeling, and a nice sound."

"Since when were you a critic? Don't tell me about music."

Billy Grey hammered on the door. "Benny. Come out of there. You all right, Benny?"

Benny ignored her. He backed off and sat in one of the camp chairs. He leaned back and wagged his cigar at Ghost. He nodded. "Okay, so let's not talk about music. Let's talk about people."

Ghost slumped against the door and listened. He didn't want to hear, but he couldn't stop listening. Benny's voice was even and calm. It was the only sound in the room. The Countess seemed to be holding her breath.

"You haven't got a friend in this world," Benny said. "And you know why. Because you're a whore." He paused, nodding. "The worst kind of whore. When an idealist sells himself, everybody passes judgement. The bigger the idealist--the bigger the whore." He jerked his head towards the Countess. "Right now you're known as her boy. And no-

body wants her boy in their band. Look at yourself, boy. Look. Just look over my shoulder at the mirror." He waited until Ghost raised his eyes and looked. "You see that, boy? There stands a stud. That's all you got to offer, man, nothing more. And as far as I know, she's the only buyer." He paused. Ghost stared at his reflection, a wide-eyed wild look on his face, his lips curled with disgust. "Now," Benny went on, "maybe you *can* get a job some place else. I don't know. But you can't be a top musician again, man, because no one can go back once he's recognized as being a stiff."

Ghost extended his hands. "Benny—" he whispered.

"Too late, kid." Benny leaned back and grinned. "I remember you said, 'Benny, make me a success.' I thought, 'Here's a guy I don't like very much—an artist who talks big and loud about art and freedom of expression.' And I said to myself, 'Here is a phony, a real phony. And he wants *me* to make *him* a success.' Well, here you are." Benny moved his head up and down, punctuating all that he had said. "You're down, all the way down. And you know, I'm glad. I'm glad you're down, because I always had you pegged for a bastard, and I hate to be wrong." He got up from the chair. He turned to the Countess. "Well, he ain't much, but he's all yours." He went to the door and moved Ghost aside. "See ya, sucker." He went through the door, and closed it after him.

"Benny!"

"Let him go," the Countess said, leaping to her feet and crossing the room to him. "We don't need him."

"I have to find another agent."

"I can do that with one phone call. Come over here and sit down." She led Ghost to the couch and sat him down. He was confused and docile.

"He has no idea of what talent is."

"I do," the Countess said, putting her arms over his shoulder.

"I don't think he ever heard me play. Not for years, anyway." He seemed to be talking to someone far away.

"Sure. He's just remembering you the way you used to be. Forget him. He's nothing. How about a scotch?"

"Yeah." His eyes were glazed with tears.

"On the rocks?" she asked. He nodded. She got up and fixed the drinks. "And who was that little tramp he brought

in here? I mean, we don't have to take that kind of treatment." She came back and put the glass in his hand. She sat down next to him. "What's the matter?"

Ghost sat hunched over. He held the drink between his knees with both hands. He did not answer. The Countess put her arms around him. She tried to kiss him, but he turned his face away.

"What's the matter, sweetheart?"

His voice was hollow with despair. Truth is a heavy load. The big monkey. Right up there between the shoulder blades. That big leering ape. Truth is a tough habit to take on, and tougher to kick. "I remember, too," he whispered, his knuckles white on the glass, "the way it used to be."

CHAPTER TWELVE

IT WAS evening. The smog was sliding in, settling down like a tea cozy over the city. The freeways were jammed. The air hummed with the collective roar of a million automobiles. The lights were on in the city—the monster wearing its jewels.

Behind the wheel of the Jaguar, Ghost slowed down as he passed Nick's Pool Hall. He drove to the next block before he parked, and walked back.

He paused on the sidewalk and looked through the window. It was different. There was a lot of action. It was early, but all the tables were in play. He opened the door and stepped inside. The place hadn't changed physically—just the action. The game ended at the middle table, and Ghost saw Nick go over and start racking the balls.

Smoke drifted lazily under the hanging lights. The atmosphere was charged with the sound of voices and the punctuating click of the balls.

Ghost walked into the bowels of the room. Nick was bent over the table. He passed on and went to the Frigidaire in the rear. He opened it, took out a bottle of beer, slammed the door. He uncapped the bottle, tilted it to his lips, then went over to Nick.

"Whatta ya say, old Greek pal? Drinking any wine lately?"

Nick looked up. His eyes blinked, then he smiled. "Hello, Ghost," he said warmly. He held out his hand. "What's new, sport?"

Ghost shook the hand. "Staying alive, y'know? Little of this, little of that. On the hustle."

"You never come around no more since you work steady," Nick said, chiding him. "All the money goes into rich people's pockets."

"Money goes to money."

"You're so right. Oh, Ghost, it's good to see you. C'mon, let's have a beer." He saw the beer in Ghost's hand. "Okay, I'll buy myself one."

"I'll buy."

"Thank you."

They went to the rear. Nick got a beer and they sat at one of the tables.

"You're doing good business," Ghost said.

"Yeah. Well, sooner or later people realize this is the best pool hall in town. It starts slow, but then I'm a patient man and business grows."

"You still loan out the back room?"

"You got something in mind?" Nick asked, narrowing his eyes.

Ghost winked. He lifted one hand palm down and waggled it. "Maybe yes, maybe no. I'm not sure."

"It's full of boxes now."

"That's no good. Music is better than boxes."

"I got married, sport. So, now I got boxes."

"Any kids?"

"Hey, gimme time. What you think?"

"Whatta you want, boy or girl?"

"A baby," Nick said. "I don't care what."

"Got a picture of the wife?"

"In my heart. Want a cigar?" Nick took out two cigars, offered one.

"No thanks."

Nick put one cigar away and lit the other. He puffed a glow on the end.

"The boys still come in?"

"No," Nick said.

"They don't?"

"Times change."

"You miss them?"

"Would I miss the sunshine? Why ask? I miss them, yes, like I miss you. They were so much life, so many dreams." He blew smoke at the ceiling. "It goes like that. You get used to not having friends. People move on. You spend all your money in uptown saloons. Pete and Shelley, they're married."

"Yeah. I was around when Shelley tied the knot."

"That's right. You see, even I forget."

"Never hear from any of them?"

"Once in a while they drop up for a game with the old Greek."

"You know if they're working?"

"Not so hot," Nick said. "They got a deal down in Los Angeles. Little dump. They play for a lot of dumbbells. Dancing and girls. The place stinks, got sawdust on the floor."

"Where's that?"

Nick glanced down at the table. He lifted his beer and drank. "They don't want to see you," he said. "Nobody like you no more, Ghost."

"That right?"

Nick nodded. "I'm sorry, Ghost."

"What's the name of this joint?"

"Don't, Ghost. Don't hurt yourself. They don't want to see you."

"Yeah, you said that. Where are they?"

"The Witch's Tail."

"I know it." He rose from the chair. He put a dollar on the table. "Nice seeing you, Nick. I'll be back."

"Ghost, you're just gonna hurt yourself."

"Already did that." He started away, then stopped. "If

you have time, Nick, you might get the boxes out of that room."

He left the pool hall and walked to his car. Okay, so they didn't want to see him. Well, they were going to. This was it. He had nothing to lose. Hell, he said aloud, I'm on my ass. I got nowhere to go but up.

Sliding into the low-slung sports car, he pulled away from the curb and headed downtown. The traffic was thinning out, and he made good time. He was too early. He went to a restaurant and ate, then returned. He had no plan. Just play it by ear.

Pete in two-four time was a gas. Ghost stood by the hat check booth and listened. It was awful. He felt better. If Pete could sound that bad, then things at Swank Town maybe weren't so awful. Ghost smiled for the first time in a long time. He moved up to the bar and ordered a drink.

The Witch's Tail was a long way from the fresh air circuit. It was a nowhere joint. The bar was like any bar anywhere. The tables had checkered tablecloths, and Nick was right, sawdust on the floor. Amen. Squaresville. It was still early for the Johns to arrive and there was an overflow of women. They crowded the bar, sat together at the tables, leaned on the brass railing that surrounded the small dance floor. They were young and old. Hookers coming up and hookers on the way down, and a few in the middle who would never make the grade anywhere. The music was straight tempo and Shelley looked bored to death behind the drums. He hit the bass. *Bump-bump-bump-bump*. Wow! Next week the American Legion parade. And Red was treating that bass as if it were just some old strumpet that he wanted to get the last mileage from. The way he used to caress that instrument. And there was that great swinging trumpet tootling out that stupid dance music.

"You need a good sax over at Swank Town?"

Ghost turned. Charlie was standing there grinning at him, his hand out. Ghost took the hand.

"What say, music man," Charlie said, "how's business?"

"Hi, Charlie."

"Long time, man. Great to see you."

"You with the boys?"

"Yeah. Just a short gig. Slumming, y'know." He laughed.

"No, but seriously, I'm thinking of forming my own group. I mean, Shelley called me. This is his gig. He needed a horn, and I was broke, so, well, y'know how it tumbles."

"Have a drink?"

"I'm with you, man." He signaled the bartender for a round. They waited for the drinks, raised their glasses, and drank.

"What's the feeling?" Ghost asked.

"I don't get you, Ghost—"

"What's the feeling against me?"

"Agh, you know. They were hurt, y'know. You put them down. They don't talk about you too much any more. Shelley's still pretty bitter, but hell, man, that's because he always dug you the most. It hurt him more. Red, too, but not so bad. Those two, y'know, they figured you could walk on the water. But I think the boys would let it go if a good spot came along. I mean, like I always say, nothing like a little money in the bank to cure the hangover."

"I'm not working at Swank Town anymore," Ghost said.

"Oh, where are you now?"

"I'm not, man, I split."

"The rich dame, too?"

"All of it, man. She's home slashing her wrists."

"For true?"

"No, hell, no. On my way out I passed a tenorman coming in."

"Well, you must have some bread in the oven."

"A car, some clothes. That's it. I split good. Up the middle and around the sides. Down and out, man, just like you."

"Well, old Ghoster, welcome to the club."

They laughed together and had another drink. The boys were still thumping out the mickey mouse stuff and it seemed to be getting worse.

"I heard you got married," Ghost said.

"Not me, man. Not my scene."

"You living with her?" His heart was pounding in its cage as he asked the question.

"With who?"

"The Princess—"

"Who's that?" Charlie was truly mystified. "What Princess?"

"Jess Polanski."

"Oh, Jess. Hell, I forgot that nickname. No, I haven't seen her for months."

"She working around?"

"No." Charlie shook his head and frowned. "She was a real stiff, man. I figured, y'know, you threw her over and I'd move in there for a bit. Oh, man, it was a mess. She come on strong for about a month. I figured her for a hip chick, y'know. Well, she lays it on me that she wants to get married. I mean, man, like why? Marry Jess Polanski? I say, for what? I'm a musician. I don't make that scene. I put her down. So she says she'll kill herself. Wow, y'know, I need this bit like a hole in the head. I cut out. It was a tough scene, man."

"What happened to her?"

"What happens to all of them in this town? They're beautiful, they got bodies. They're just one of the crowd in this town. So they go work in an airplane factory or they peddle it. Some chicks don't like making airplanes. They gotta eat, too."

"Where is she now?"

Charlie cocked his head and squinted. "You still warm for that chick?"

"You know where she is?"

"Oh, c'mon, Ghost, get off it. I like you, man. You were always a winner—the flip side of the coin. I always really admire guys like you that don't care what people think. But this chick, man, I mean she's bad news. She might come on hip, but that chick has got nothing for a guy like you but a kitchen and kids."

"You have no idea where I could find her?"

Charlie shook his head. He pursed his lips and lifted his eyes to the ceiling. "Oh, man, you always were the damndest, mostest, stubbornest cat. Last I heard she was hanging out in Reno's."

"Yeah—Reno's." He gulped his drink.

"Say—uh—Ghost," Charlie said, "Any chance of putting the arm on you? I'm sort of on my ass, y'know."

Ghost took a roll of bills from his pocket. He fanned them out and gave half to Charlie.

"You sure, man?" Charlie asked, holding the money.

"Now we're even," Ghost said. "Let's start there. Don't get lost, huh?"

"I'll be around, man."

Ghost left the club. He was in a hurry. He was nervous. It had to work. His life was like a precious vase that had been shattered. He had to find all the pieces and put them together to make it worthwhile, to make it work.

Reno's. Where it all began. He sat in the car and stared at the blinking neon light. Reno's. Reno's. Reno's. He was afraid. His hands were sweating and his throat was dry. Seven months. A long time. An eternity for gigolos and hookers. Like a flame, they fade fast. He got out of the car. He straightened his tie, took a deep breath, and went to the door.

Like everything else, Reno's had changed. Prosperity had arrived. It was no longer the neighborhood pizza joint. It was chrome and imitation leather and imitation drapes and imitation pictures. Even the juke box was gaudier, a monster of colored lights and bubbling water. At the moment it was offering the great trumpet of Miles Davis, and the sound cut through the low-hanging smoke. Reno was behind the bar, but he wore a black bow-tie and a short red jacket, and there were deep lines under his eyes. The lighting was dim.

Ghost stopped inside the door. Reno was busy mixing a drink and did not look up. There were eight people at the bar. The booths were empty. A woman sat alone and made circles with her glass. She turned her head and looked at Ghost. A couple were down from her, their heads together. A man sat with his wife. It was that obvious. Jess was at the end of the bar with two men.

She was high and her voice was loud. But it was the same wonderful voice. They were drinking champagne. Jess was sitting and the two men stood on either side. She wore a white-on-white sheath dress that clung to her. Her hair was shorter, but still the color of honey. The change was in the mouth and in the eyes. Hard. Bitter. Her laughter was forced and hollow. The two men were middle-aged and well-dressed. They could have been gamblers. They had the hustler look. They looked hard and they wore large rings.

Ghost felt the sickness grow in him, the sudden quicken-

ing of the pulse, the fear that fingered through his guts and grabbed at his heart. Like the last day at Nick's.

"Happy birthday to you," the man on the right said. "I mean, whatta you take us for, idiots or something? You got it gold-plated?"

"You asked me," Jess said, "so I told you."

"You buying an apartment house?" the other one asked. "What you want?"

"A rose-covered cottage. But you can't give me that. So make me an offer."

"Let's have another drink."

Reno leaned over the bar and filled Jess's glass. He whispered to her.

"Okay, Reno," Jess said. "I know this is a respectable joint." She turned to the man on her left. "Look, mister, this is my busy time."

"Then have another drink. It's a deal. Right, Sal?"

"Okay with me."

"Then let's have the drink." She emptied her glass. "Nothing's too good for tonight."

Reno moved along the bar. He looked up, stared, then the smile spread over his face.

"Ghost!" he shouted. "Ghost, boy, where ya been?"

"Hi, Reno."

Jess dropped her glass. It smashed on the floor. She turned on the stool.

"Hello, Jess," Ghost said. He walked half the length of the bar. "I want to talk to you, Jess."

"Go away."

"I have to see you, Jess."

"Hey, what is this?" one of the men said.

"Keep out of it, fella," Ghost said. "It doesn't concern you."

"That so? I heard the lady tell you to blow. That concerns me." He stepped away from the bar. He flexed the knuckles of his beefy right hand in his left palm.

Ghost felt the trembling in his legs, the sweat beginning to run, the numbing fear. Just like before. Just like always.

"I'm taking you out of here, Jess."

"Ha," the man said, "get him." He advanced, a smile on his face.

Ghost leaped the bar. He swept a beer bottle into his

hand, moved forward, and dropped the big man. He went down hard. The second man came in low. Ghost swung the bottle and put him on top of his friend. They both groaned and started to get up. Ghost smashed the beer bottle on the brass rail. He crouched and put the broken glass before the man's eyes.

"Don't get up," he said. "Just crawl out. That goes for both of you. Keep crawling or I'll cut you to ribbons."

They crawled. Ghost held the door for them. They got up and staggered down the street. He came back along the bar. Jess had her head down on her arms. He touched the back of her head. She looked up.

"What say."

"Hello, Jess."

"What? No more Princess?"

"No more Princess. Just Jess. It's a new world."

"Says you. What'd you come back here for? I don't need you to come in here and ruin everything. I know what I am. I don't fake it." She sat up and faced him. "It's too late for Americana. I'm not even high fashion. I do what I can do best and hope that tomorrow won't be there. You get me? I am me! Good or bad, here I am. Take it or leave it." Her mouth was twisted with bitterness. "Have you done so much better?"

"No. Worse, I guess. I love you, Jess."

She caught her breath, then swallowed. "If you could," she said, "but I'm nothing."

"You're something," he said softly. "Now go powder your nose and I'll take you home. Go on."

"You're real crazy, Ghost."

"I'm a panic. C'mon, let's go."

She stared at him, biting her lower lip. Her eyes misted suddenly. She slid off the stool and hurried to the ladies room.

"I'm glad to see you, Ghost," Reno said. "I remember that first night."

"Yeah, it was a good time."

"Time's change," Reno said.

"Time and people."

"Yeah." Reno paused, then he said, "She's been waiting for you for a long time. I'm glad you got here. She's been on the skids."

"Haven't we all."

"She's a lotta woman."

"Yeah. How much I owe you?"

"Give me ten, I'll call it even."

Ghost took the money from his pocket and peeled off two fives. "Thanks," Reno said. Ghost was putting the money back, when they heard the crash of glass from the ladies room.

"Oh, my God!" Reno exclaimed.

Ghost was off his stool and running. Reno came behind him. He slammed through the door of the ladies room.

"Jess!"

She had smashed the mirror with her shoe. She had a piece of the glass in her hand and was about to slash her wrist. Ghost grabbed her arm. He spun her around. She cried, the tears streaming over her cheeks. He held both her arms and pulled her to him. "Jess," he whispered into her hair, "Oh, Jess, Jess."

Reno was in the doorway. "Oh, man, Ghost, I've had it."

"I'll pay for it, Reno."

"Hell, it's not that, Ghost. I just don't want any trouble."

"No trouble," Ghost said. "It's all over. No trouble."

"Okay." Reno turned and left. The door was still open.

Jess lifted her face. "I'm all right," she said wearily. "It's over. I couldn't have done it, Ghost. I had lots of time. I just couldn't do it."

"I know."

Jess turned to the broken mirror. She straightened her hair and wiped at her eyes. "I don't have anything left, do I?"

"Yeah, you do. I think we both got just enough left. It still hurts."

"Oh, come on, let's not get serious again." She took the cigarette Ghost offered her, inhaled deeply. "What's new with your life? How are the boys?"

"We're all down, Jess. It's been a bad scene."

"Don't tell me it's because you miss me."

"In a way." He nodded, lifted his palms. "I miss it all."

"Well, you can't go back, can you?"

"I love you, Jess."

"No," she said, "no. You can't. I've gone too far this time."

"No, Jess."

"I'm a hooker."

"We're all of us hookers, Jess. No matter how you slice it, we're all hookers."

"No . . . no . . . you don't understand. You—"

"I know."

"You couldn't. I never went this low before. I never—"

"I don't care."

"You don't know what I've done."

"And you don't know what *I've* done. And I have no intention of telling you. Jess, next to me you're an angel, but that's no more. I been down in a cesspool and I'm climbing out. And I need help."

"I can't do you any good!"

Ghost pressed a finger to her lips. He took her face in his hands. "You're so beautiful," he said.

"I don't love you, Ghost."

"That's the way it goes," he said. "But I'll take that chance. If your thinking is so mixed up, I mean, if you can say that you're nothing, and I know that you're very much something, then maybe you're wrong about not loving me. Come on, let's get out of here."

Ghost took her hand and led her from the ladies room. They went to the bar and collected her purse. They walked through the curious stares and into the night. They were silent. They got into the car. Ghost pulled from the curb and turned back to Los Angeles. He parked a block from the Witch's Tail, and walked.

"Where are we going?" Jess asked.

"I have to see something."

They came to the bizarre entrance to the place and went inside. It was crowded now. The girls were doing a brisk trade; the dance floor was crowded. The music was just as bad; the addition of Charlie's horn did not help. Ghost steered Jess towards the bandstand. When she saw who was playing she stopped and turned.

"Why did you bring me here? I don't need this. I don't want to see—"

"I do. Jess, I need you now. Help me, Jess."

"I can't even help myself."

"C'mon." He took her hand and led her. They crossed the dance floor with effort and finally reached the edge of

the bandstand. The group thumped out the dance beat. Ghost could feel Jess trembling. They stood there and watched.

"What a bunch of eightballs!" Ghost shouted. Shelley and Red saw him at the same time. Pete was next and he waggled a finger and grinned. "Playing background music to a bunch of flat-foot floozies."

"Get lost!" Shelley snarled. He dropped a beat and rushed to pick it up.

"Oh, no you don't," Ghost said.

"Drop dead!" Shelley shouted.

"All right," Ghost said, "but on the way down I don't want to hurt anybody. I mean, when they toss on the sod it's too late to say I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Pete. I'm sorry, Red. I'm sorry, Charlie. I'm sorry, Shelley." He looked at the strange piano man. "I'm sorry I don't know your name."

Jess was crying. She clutched his hand, and she could feel him shaking.

"It's too late for the blues," Shelley sneered.

Pete came to the edge of the platform and looked down at Jess. "Hi, Princess," he said. Jess nodded back to him, but she couldn't speak.

"Go on," Shelley said, "Go spin your cotton candy dreams somewhere else, man. Maybe this ain't exactly Disneyland, but we're here for the ride. End of intermission. Beat it, we don't need finks."

Shelley slammed down on the two-four beat. Pete shrugged and began to blow. He played the dreary number without interest.

Ghost was wailing inside. He had made his play and they had turned him out. The chance was gone. He knew that they had all gone too far down to ever crawl back to the top, but the chance he wanted was just to mend the scars. The only thing that could mend them was the music. They were sick and they were throwing away the medicine. Maybe Red. Maybe. He looked up. Red's expression was stoic. As he caught Ghost's eye, he pulled a string and let it twang. No buyers for maybe dreams. That was it.

Jess released Ghost's hand. She stepped forward and climbed to the bandstand. She stood by the piano. She turned her smile on Pete and he smiled back. Red tried hard, but he broke down. The grin spread.

"Let a gal in, fellas," Jess said. "What I mean is, move over." She moved up next to Pete. Charlie stopped blowing. The piano man was still going on the awful beat, and Shelley said, "Cool it, huh?" The music stopped.

Shelley kept the framework of a beat going and Jess slid in. She took it from down low, the rumbling, husky guts of the No-title blues. She brought it up, that wailing, I been so unhappy blues. And Shelley was there with the solid beat, and Red was grooving. Jess made love to that blues, and they were swinging. Charlie came in on the obbligato, and Pete rode on from the top.

Ghost listened with joy surging through him. He was still excluded, but that music was him, so there was a chance.

Shelley stopped playing. He put his sticks on the snare and stood up. The others kept on, but the anchor beat was gone.

No, Ghost murmured, oh, no! Don't do this to us, Shelley, don't. We're so close. The anguish was etched on his face. He held his breath. He gripped his hands together.

"Please!" he shouted. "Please!"

Shelley stepped up to the piano. He leaned over and spoke to the player. The stranger nodded his head and got up. He stepped off the stand. When he passed Ghost, he said, "It's all yours, man. It's not my scene."

The End

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